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I have the surest bet that you ever heard of. Eugen Sandow himself said that my system is the shortest and surest that America ever had to offer.

Follow me closely now and I'll tell you a few things I'm going to do for you.

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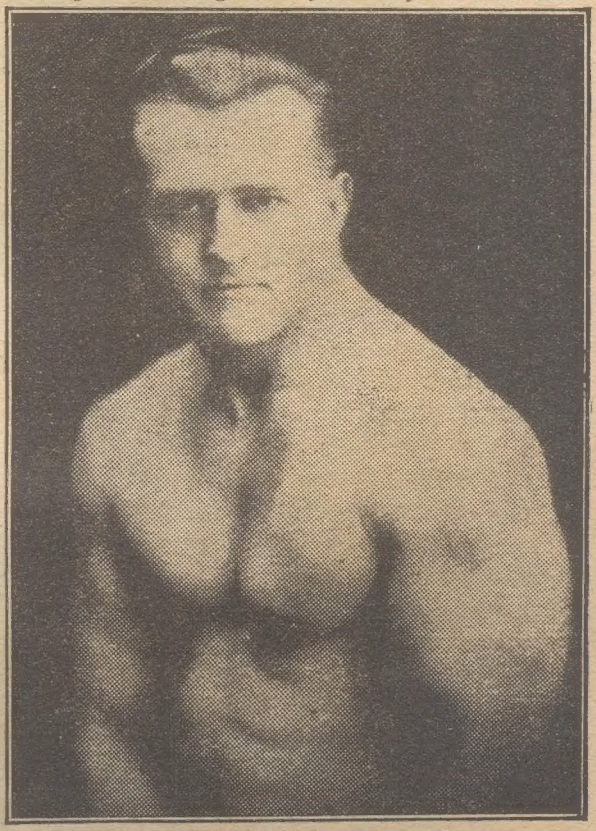
In just 30 days I'm going to increase your arm one full inch. Yes, and add two inches to your chest in the same length of time. But that's nothing. I've only started; get this—I'm going to put knobs of muscles on your shoulders like baseballs. I'm going to deepen your chest so that you will double your lung capacity. Each breath you take will flood every crevice of your pulmonary cavity with oxygen. This will load your blood with red corpuscles, shooting life and vitality throughout your entire system. I'm going to give you arms and legs like pillars. I'm going to work on every inner muscle as well, toning up your liver, your heart, etc. You'll have a snap to your step and a flash to your eye. You'll feel the real pep shooting up and down your old backbone. You'll stretch out your big brawny arms and crave for a chance to crush everything before you. You'll just bubble over with vim and animation.



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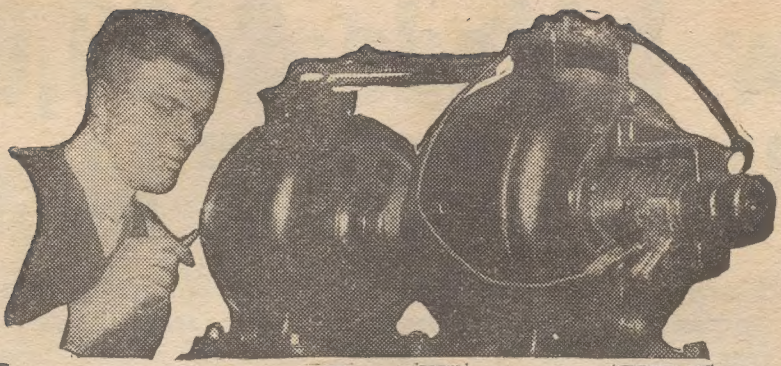

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That's what my friends said, when I told them about my idea for starting a real estate business "on the side."

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A well-known cartoonist's conception of my idea

Use My Successful System

When I started in real estate, I tossed overboard all the hit-or-miss, haphazard, rule-of-thumb methods of the past, and put into operation a system of my own which is as superior to the old way as the modern mazda lamp is superior to the tallow candle of our forefathers.

With little education—no experience—no influence—and less than five dollars capital—I started in my spare time and met with instant success.

If you want to follow in my footsteps—if you want to use my amazingly successful system—send for my free book now. It tells how I succeeded—how I have helped other men and women win big success—how you, too, can succeed—how you can have a splendid business of your own and make more money than you ever made before.

A Wonderful Business

Real estate—conducted my way—is a great business. It is as permanent as the earth itself. It is getting bigger and bigger as the country grows. It doesn't require years of study to learn like most other businesses and professions. It offers enormous earnings to ambitious men and women. Users of my system are making $1,000—$5,000—$10,000—on single deals—as much as the average man gets for months and years of hard work. And the business is practically unlimited. Ten million properties are now on the market for rent, sale or exchange. And you can start with little or no capital—right at home—in your spare time. I did. So did others. So can you. My free book tells you how.

Read These Records

Here are just a few brief extracts from the many letters received from happy users of my money-making real estate system:

"Made $5,500 on first deal after getting your system."—Mrs. Evalynn Balster, Illinois (*Former School Teacher*). "Sold a lot by your methods in less than one hour and my commission was $800."—J. A. Furguson, Florida (*Former Dry Cleaner*). "Sold over $100,000 worth of property my first year with your methods."—H. D. Van Houten, New Jersey, (*Former Grocery Clerk*). "Have sold thousands of dollars worth of property your way. Have deals that will go beyond the $300,000 mark."—Carrie Marshall, Mississippi (*Former Housekeeper*). "My first day's work in real estate netted me $435. I recommend your system to anyone wishing to get into a pleasant and profitable business."—F. B. Bennet, California (*Former Traffic Manager*). "Have sold one $5,000 lot and 3 houses so far with your system."—Mrs. B. H. Morehouse, New York (*Former Housewife*).

These are just a few samples of success that you will read about in my free book. Get it. Read it. Follow its instructions. Make big money my way.

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Mail coupon right now and get this valuable, money-making information free. It doesn't cost you a nickel to find out what this book can do for you. So act at once. You will never forgive yourself if you turn your back on this unusual chance to win big, business success. Address PRESIDENT, American Business Builders, Inc., Dept. K-32, 205 East 42nd St., New York City.

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We couldn't save a cent!

Deep in the Rut

"I hadn't received a decent raise in years and my small salary scarcely lasted from week to week. Margaret did all her own housework, but the bills kept piling up and I was always afraid I'd lose my job.

Friend Makes $5000 a Year

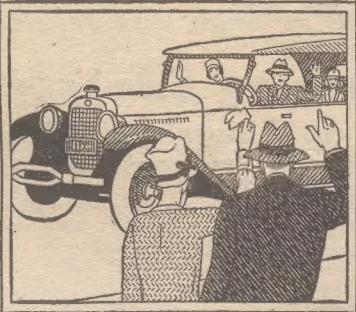
"One day I had luncheon with Tom Wilson, who used to work right beside me before he took up an I. C. S. course. He told me how he was making $5000 a year and had just bought a new home in the suburbs.

Makes Important Resolution

"That woke me up. I told Margaret that if the International Correspondence Schools could help a man like Tom Wilson they could help me. So I decided to enroll for a course and study at home.

Gets Raise in Salary

"That certainly was a lucky day for me. In four months I received a raise in salary and before the end of the year I was next in line for manager of my department. I'm now making more than Tom Wilson.



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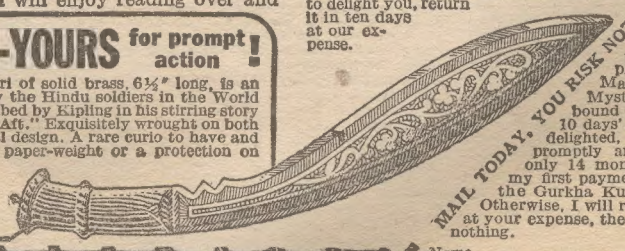

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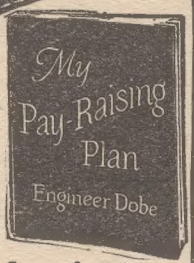

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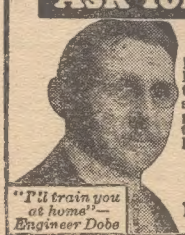

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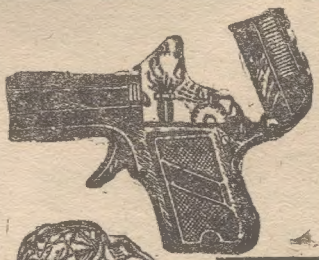

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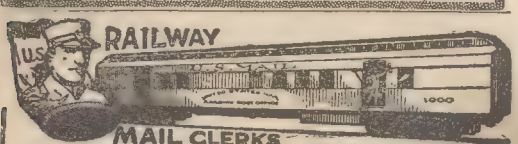

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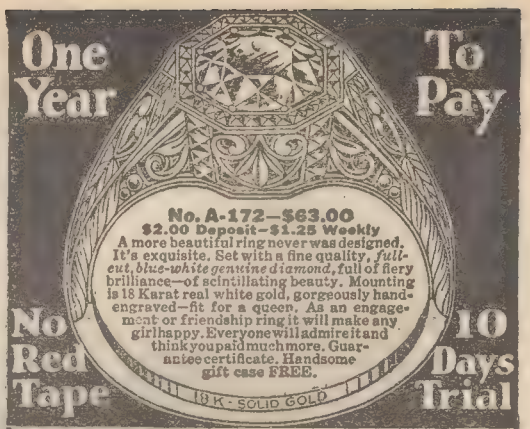

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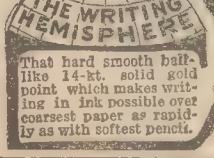

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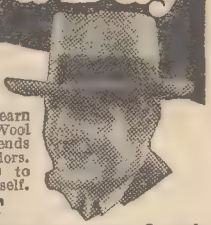

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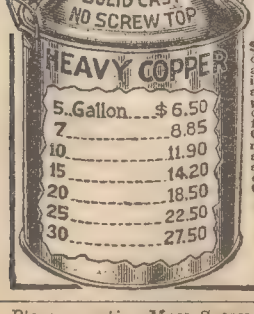

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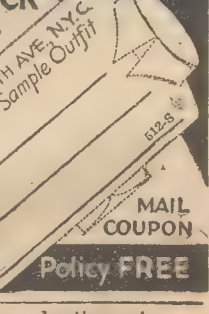

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"He can't play... turn on the radio" they all shouted

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Olive Murray was full of pep as she adjusted the dials of her radio. "Shucks," she said as she discovered someone making a speech. "Let's try another station."

But there wasn't a note of dance music on the air. "Something like this *would* happen the night of my party," she moaned. "Never mind, there'll be a good orchestra on at 10:30."

You could see disappointment written all over the guests' faces. Suddenly I bucked up my courage and took Olive aside.

"What's the piano closed for?" I asked.

"Why not? No one here plays. I only wish somebody could play, though."

"I'll try to fill in for a while, Olive."

"You're joshing, Dick! You never played before at parties."

"That's right, Olive, but I'll play tonight." I assured her.

I could tell she didn't believe me. And what a roar the crowd let out when I sat down.

"He can't play," called out a voice good-naturedly from the rear. "Let's turn on the radio and listen to the speeches."

"Sure," added one of my friends, "I know that he can't tell one note from another. It's all a lot of Greek to him."

I said nothing. But my fingers were itching to play.

"Give him a chance," said Olive. "*Maybe* he can play."

A Dramatic Moment

That settled it. There was no maybe about it. I played through the first bars of Strauss' immortal "Blue Danube Waltz." A tense silence fell on the guests as I continued. Suddenly I switched from classical music to the syncopated tunes from "Good News." Everyone started to dance. They forgot all about the radio. But soon, of course, they insisted that I tell them all about my new accomplishment. Where I had learned . . . when I had learned . . . how?

The Secret

"Have you ever heard of the U. S. School of Music?" I asked.

A few of my friends nodded. "That's a correspondence school, isn't it?" they exclaimed.

"Exactly," I replied. "They have a surprisingly easy method through which you can learn to play any instrument without a teacher."

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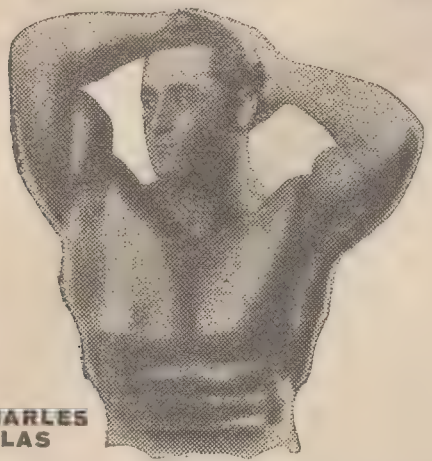

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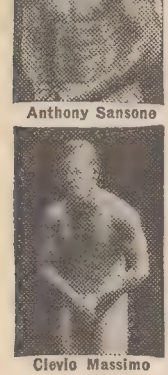

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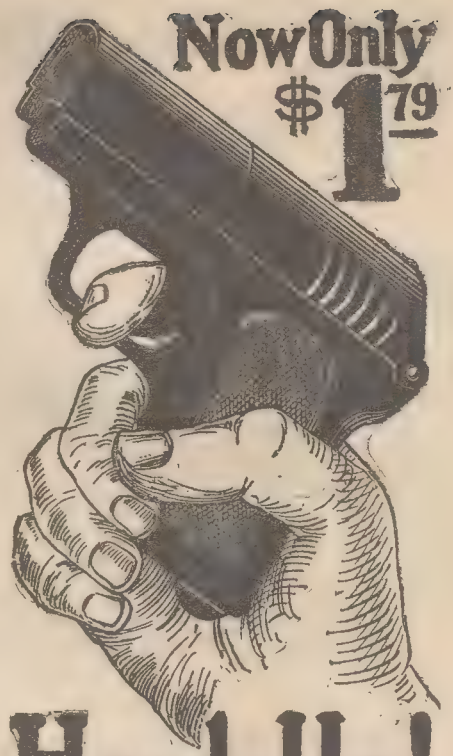

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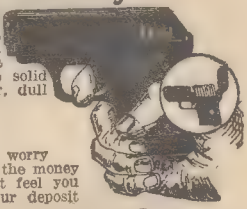

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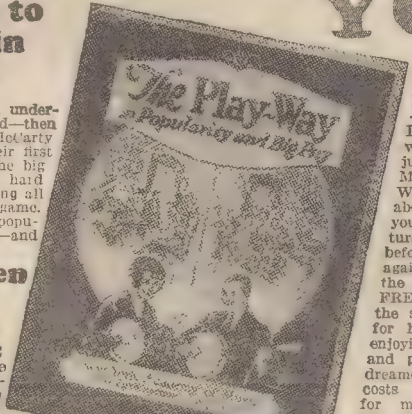

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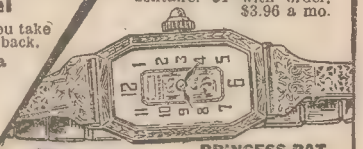

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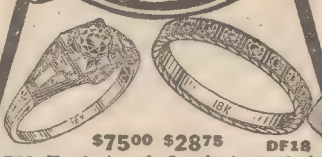

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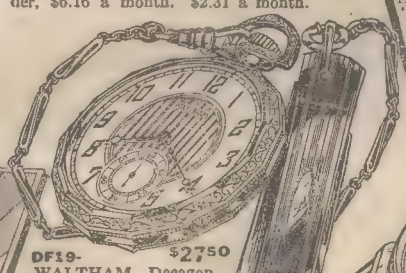

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WEST

R. DE S. HORN, *Editor* FREDERICK CLAYTON, *Assoc. Editor*

CONTENTS

Cover Design——"High, Wide And Handsome!" **Arthur Mitchell**

CHAFFEE OF ROARING HORSE **Ernest Haycox** 3
Jim Chaffee hears the distant rumble of disaster in the curses of his enemy Theodorick Perrine.

RUNNIN' WILD **Glenn A. Connor** 23
Tommy Karol could conquer wild horses—but they got him in the end!

REAL MONEY **Carl Elmo Freeman** 35
A gang o' train robbers kills theirselves an' blames it onto Pot an' Bolt.

MARKED FOR SLAUGHTER **Ruel McDaniel** 44
Swede and his six-guns ride roaring into Conejo!

AVENGING SPURS (*Complete Novel*) **Clem Yore** 54
Bronc rider, leather-pusher, detective and gun-slinger—that's Larry Shane.

TWO-GUN-SHERIFFIN' **Clive Crosby** 86
Sheriff Bill Harris distributes tickets to hell.

THE KING OF KAJAK MOUNTAIN **Howard E. Morgan** 95
A man, a moose, a bear—and hunger!

THIRTEEN NOTCHES **Foster-Harris** 103
An oil town killer kills once too often.

GUN JUSTICE (*Conclusion*) **William Colt MacDonald** 108
The vengeance trail leads to the crashing conclusion—Melody's single-handed war!

ASK ME AN OLD ONE! 124
A Department of Informal Information.

COME AN' GET IT! 125

PRIZE LETTER CONTEST 127

THE LAUGH CORRAL 128

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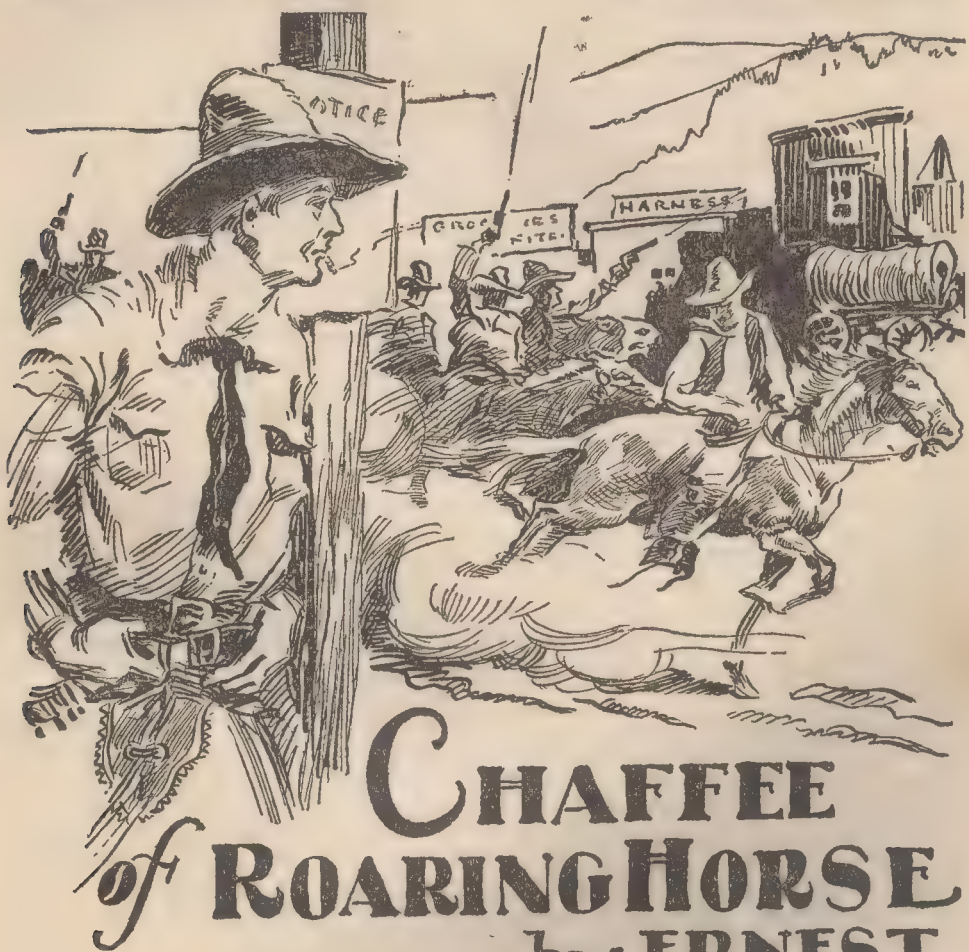


Chaffee of Roaring Horse

by Ernest Haycox

Part I

Author of "Free Grass," "Brand Fires on the Ridge," etc.

Sometimes hard luck sneaks up so a puncher doesn't know it. Jim Chaffee's hard luck began when he lost his ranch. But that was only the beginning, for Luck was to ride hard over the whole Roaring Horse range before the end.

Chapter I

JIM CHAFFEE TAKES A LOSS

WHEN Jim Chaffee walked out of his homestead cabin for the last time after three long years of struggle, it was with his senses sharpened to the pleasantness of the place he was losing. The cabin sat on the south bank of a small creek that crossed the desert diagonally from the white and hooded peaks of Roaring Horse range, to the dismally dead slash of Roaring Horse Canyon. Cottonwoods bunched about the log house, the lodgepole corrals, the pole and shake barn. The

morning's sun, brilliant but without warmth, streamed through the apertures of the trees. The sparkle of frost was to be seen here and there in the shadowed crevices of the creek bank. And there was the definite threat of winter in the sharp air, reminding Jim of the nights he had spent beside a bright red cabin stove, listening to the blizzard howling around the stout eaves, dreaming his dreams. He would never step inside the house again. These three years had gone for nothing.

Before closing the door Jim ranged the room with a last wistful and reluctant glance, eyes touching upon those household goods with which he had lived for so long a time. Nothing was out of place, nothing removed save one solitary article, a bright blue-patterned mush bowl that he carried under an arm.

Jim looked gravely and regretfully and then closed the door, turned the lock and dropped the key in his pocket. As that lock clicked his lips pressed together and his face settled. From the moment of discovery Jim Chaffee had liked the location above all others. Within its area he felt contented, somehow controlled by a feeling that he had struck roots into the very soil. Nor had he ever gone away from it without becoming restless and wishing to be soon back. Three years of himself was in the place.

His horse stood saddled and waiting. Jim swung up and turned out along the trail. A hundred yards away he stopped to look for a last time. The cabin was half hidden in the creek's depression, a small wisp of smoke rose still from the chimney. He had seen this picture a thousand times yet today it affected him strangely. For today at noon his notes fell due and he hadn't as much as a solid dollar to pay on them. Real property and chattels belonged after that hour to the bank and he became what he had been in the beginning, an errant cowpuncher with a horse beneath him and the sky above him. Three severe winters and a falling beef market had wiped him out.

Jim looked to the peaks and shook his head. They stood out too clearly, they seemed too close; and around the tips was a faint and contorted wisp of cloud that inevitably augured the fourth successive hard winter. He lifted his gun from the holster, fired a single shot and whirled about, galloping rapidly away.

"By the Lord, I hate to go!" he gasped.

It wasn't hard to lose money or labor, but Jim knew he never again would find a piece of land lying watered and sheltered and snug like that piece he had just left. Even if he did find it he wouldn't feel the same somehow.

"It's just that a man nourishes a picture a long while and gets sort of attached to it. No other picture will do. Not even if it's made identical. Well, we're free. Now what?"

Jim studied the question over the even miles of desert. Studied it with a somber leisure, sitting slack in the saddle and ever now and anon sweeping the horizons with long close-lidded surveys. He made a splendid picture as he swayed to the dun beast's progress—a tall man built in that mold so deceptive to the casual eye. He seemed to have no particular claim to physical strength. His shoulders were broad yet rather sharp at the points and his chest was long and fairly flat. On this frame his clothes hung loosely and so concealed the springs of his power, which were muscles that lay banded along arm and shoulder like woven wire. A stiff brimmed Stetson slanted the shadows over a bronzed face lean almost to the point of sharpness. His chin was cleft, his lips were broad and somewhat thin, and constantly under the guard of his will. Deep in protecting wells his eyes were apt to remain fixed for long intervals on some distant point; and from the expression in them it was evident that they had the power to draw the rest of his face into a mask or to fill it with buoyancy and humor.

"The answer," said he to himself after his homestead was lost in the distance, "is sort of plain. A man can win or he can lose. I lost. But he can try again. I guess I'll muster up some cash and buy me a set of traps. There's a piece of country away up on the bench by Thirty-four Pass—by gosh, we ain't had time to take in this familiar sight for a long spell."

HORSE and rider had arrived at a fence. Five feet beyond the fence the desert dropped into the black and profound gorge of the Roaring Horse. It was not wide. Fifty yards would have covered the distance from rim to rim. But excepting at nooning the sun never touched the distant water. And the sound of its booming, turbulent progress was all but lost in the depths.

Jim Chaffee got down and crawled through the fence, advancing to the edge of the rim. There was something about the Roaring Horse that struck a responsive chord in his nature. It was the same with those distant peaks, and with the soft smell of sage carrying across the desert or with the sight of a fire gleaming like a crimson bomb across the plain at night. So he stood watching the water boiling down in the canyon, rolling himself a cigarette. Presently he was asaddle and riding away.

"That gives me a thought," he murmured. "I'll be buckin' old lady fortune again. I'll be tryin' to make a go of somethin' else. But why not take a little vacation? Why not lay in the sun like a snake and soak in a heap of laziness? I've been worryin' and schemin' and muckin' till I'm all shriveled up inside like a last year's potato. I ain't had a drink, I ain't gambled, I ain't danced, I ain't grinned—since when?"

Jim traveled faster, aiming away from the rim of the canyon. He had to see Miz Satterlee at the Stirrup S and give back the blue mush bowl. Once upon a time she had sent it to him filled with home-made fudge. So he drawled soberly at the dun horse and left the miles behind him. All this was Stirrup S soil—Satterlee range.

The sun swung up, the air was racy with autumn crispness. Jim laid his course by a remote windmill. Once upon a time he had been a Stirrup S rider and pretty proud of it. Maybe he'd tackle it again, after he had taken his justly earned rest.

Thinking thus, Jim at last came to the sprawling home quarters of the ranch, threaded through the maze of corrals, skirted the enormous bunkhouse—Stirrup S was a large outfit—and drew rein before the porch of the big house. Miz Satterlee rocked herself thereon, as she had been in the habit of doing for thirty years. She looked up to him, smiling briskly.

Miz Satterlee was a character in the land. A small and sprightly woman with snapping black eyes and a head of hair that even now showed no gray. She spoke with a terrific frankness when the spirit moved her, and her charities were numberless. It was a mark of Dad Satterlee's character that Miz Satterlee once had publicly said that her husband was smart enough to be governor. She was smart enough to be governor herself and she knew a good man when she saw one—even if it was her own husband.

"Hello, Jim," she spoke to Chaffee. "When were you away from your ranch last?"

"Couple-three months I guess, Miz Satterlee," drawled Jim, hooking a leg over the saddle horn.

"I bet you're down to bacon rind and bran biscuits. Most men are foolish like that."

He bent out and laid the blue mush bowl on the porch. "I'm returnin' it with thanks," said he. "I won't be eatin' mush for some time."

SHE bit a thread with her teeth and raked him with a bright glance. "Times a little bit hard up your way, Jim?"

"Oh, so-so. Guess we're all in the same boat this year."

She spoke with an admirable offhand air. "I was telling Dad last night he ought to get you to do the wood hauling this fall. Somebody's got to do it. And you know how high spirited these young hands are we got. Haul wood? La—it'd insult them."

For no reason at all he grinned. It changed his looks so completely that even Miz Satterlee marked the transformation to herself. It took five years from his face and added a quality of good humored and gay handsomeness. "Don't you worry about me, Miz Satterlee. I locked my door a little while back. I'm deliverin' the key to Josiah Craib at the bank. What's left out of the wreck you see on the humble person before you."

"Jim Chaffee! Busted? Why, you darn fool—didn't Dad Satterlee make it a point to say he was behind you any time?"

"A keg without its own bottom ain't much of a keg at all," said he.

"Fiddlesticks! Men are darn fools. Satterlee's the only one I ever met that wasn't." She abandoned her sewing and rocked vigorously. "Now what are you aimin' to do?"

"Not sure," said Jim Chaffee.

"I know what," decided Miz Satterlee. "You go put yourself back in circulation awhile. Play some cards, drink some. Not too much, mind me. But some. Let the girls see you again, Chaffee. They'll fall head over heels to invite you around

to eat and you'll get some decent cooking for a spell. Maybe some of them won't mind bein' kissed a couple times. Scandalous, but it'll make you feel a heap better."

"Sage advice," murmured Jim Chaffee. "All except the kissin' part of it. I'm pretty bashful, Miz Satterlee. Who'll I start with?"

"Go 'long, don't you try to fool me. Start with the girl you kissed last."

"She's married," said Jim very cheerfully.

"Whoever she is," countered Miz Satterlee promptly, "you could have married her first. Bashful! Don't tell me that. I know your reputation. There's six or seven girls who'd have been tickled to death to've kept house over on your place. You made a mistake, Chaffee, in not takin' some neat little wife. You wouldn't be broke now if you had done that."

"I wouldn't ask any girl to work that hard," he answered, not so cheerfully.

"What's a woman for? You're just as foolish as the rest of the men."

He changed the subject. "Where's Dad?"

"In town. He's to be judge at the rodeo tomorrow. Went early to arrange things, he said. I know Satterlee. You'll probably find him in the Gusher playin' poker."

"Ain't you afraid of him gamblin' like that?" drawled Jim, smiling again.

"Why should I be?" parried Miz Satterlee. "He always wins."

Chaffee gathered the reins and turned away. "Imagine me forgettin' it bein' rodeo time. I'm the original old man from the hills. I reckon I'll have to introduce myself all over again. So-long, Miz Satterlee."

The mistress of the Stirrup S watched him canter through the yard, her bright eyes raised against the sun. And she sighed. "Chaffee don't know how good looking he is," she opined to herself. "Well, it's nice to be humble about yourself, but it ain't nice to be downright dumb about it. They'll be some girls sprucin' up their caps from now on, I vow."

THE rodeo in Roaring Horse town explained the empty Stirrup S yard. Everybody would be crowding the county seat, primed for the morrow's excitement. Jim Chaffee grew eager to be among old friends again and he paced down the broad and hard beaten trail. About three of the afternoon Jim entered town, stabled his horse and set forth toward the bank to wind up the last sorry detail of his bankrupt affairs.

He had called himself a stranger, yet twenty times or more in the short interval between bank and stable he was called by his name and stopped to swap gossip. He was struck resoundingly on the back, he was hauled about, and threatened with violence once if he refused to enter and tip up a convivial glass. The gravity left his lean face and a sparkle came into his deep eyes. Down by the Gusher's front he bumped into a solid delegation of Stirrup S hands, all old-time friends, and they closed around him hilariously. One shrill yip split the street.

"Hi—look at this lean slab o' bacon!"

"Don't talk to that dam' nester! It's him what's been butcherin' our beef!"

"How could a man eat Stirrup S beef and still be so peaked around the gills?"

"Well, mebbe he's been eatin' mutton then."

Jim Chaffee built himself a cigarette and grinned at the pack. "Boys," said he, when a lull arrived, "take the advice of one that's a father to you all. Never stray far from a steady pay check. Honor your parents, cherish the little red schoolhouse, speak respectfully of all our great institutions—and don't try to run a jackrabbit ranch like me."

"Feel poor?" demanded one of the Stirrup S crowd.

"No, I'm too dumb to feel poor," drawled Jim. "I'm froze out. I'll be back toppin' horses for the outfit when I get a rest in. Where's Mack Moran?"

"Somewhere lookin' for a scrap. You know Mack. He's a-been mournin' yore absence, Jim."

"He'll mourn my presence," grinned Jim.

"Goin' to ride in the rodeo, Jim?"

"I've forgot how."

A terrific clamor met this. Then a woman's voice, clear and musical and slightly amused, said, "If you please, gentlemen," and the Stirrup S crowd moved off the sidewalk to a man. Jim Chaffee, tightly hedged in, looked over the shoulder of a friend in time to see a girl passing. Her face was half hidden under a gay and wide-brimmed hat of the period; but her hazel eyes met his for a a moment with a kind of curiosity, seem-

ing to ask him, "What kind of a man are you that all these punchers should draw around you?" The next moment she was gone and Jim saw the flash of her dress down by the entrance of the hotel. Something happened to Jim Chaffee. He muttered, "I've got to go, boys. Let me out of this jam."

"Theodorik Perrine's in town, Jim," somebody spoke in a different tone. "He's ridin' tomorrow."

THEY had all been rollicking and easy-humored. Now they were sober, watching Jim with the close inspection that a friend can alone give to a friend. Chaffee's attention centered directly on the speaker. His lids drooped. "That's interestin'. Maybe I will ride. Now I've got to hustle off to the bank. See you later."

He shouldered through them and walked by the hotel. The girl was at that precise moment climbing the lobby stairs. One quick sidewise glance revealed that. Going on, Jim entered the bank and tried to maintain a cheerfulness of countenance he was by no means feeling. Mark Eagle, the teller, raised a full-blooded Umatilla Indian face to Jim and spoke pleasantly. "Hello, Jim. I saw Mack Moran two-three minutes ago on the street. He was wondering whether you aimed to come in."

"I'd better find him before he tears somethin' apart," said Jim. "You're puttin' on fat, Mark. Better take some time out hunting. Craib in his office?"

Mark Eagle ducked his round face. Jim Chaffee walked to a far door and opened it without knocking. Josiah Craib sat stooped over a plain pine desk, his finger trailing along a small map. He looked up with the air of a man about to speak disapproval, but that changed when he saw his visitor. Jim said, "Hello, Craib. I'm surrenderin' the last legal relic of my ranch. Here's your key and God bless you. I'm busted."

Craib's bald and bony head glistened under a patch of light coming through a high side window. "Shut the door, Jim. Sit down. I'm sorry."

"Why be sorry?" countered Jim, throwing the key on the desk. "A banker can't afford to be sorry, can he?"

"I would like to give you another year—" began Craib. But Jim Chaffee broke in bluntly.

"I'd be just as poor next year as this. It takes three years to get a herd started. I banked on that. I lost. It would take me another three to get back where I began. It's a fourth hard winter hidin' behind the peaks, Craib."

Craib seemed a clumsy figure for his profession. His lank legs were too high for the space beneath the table, his spare chest towered above it. Everything about him was bony—fists and cheeks and nose. He owned a narrow, overly long face across which the skin lay tightly; and that tightness was the instrument that caused him to be an enigma in the Roaring Horse country after twenty years of residence.

The country wove strange and contradictory stories about him—he was as hard as flint, he was just, he was fabulously rich, he was poor and on the verge of insolvency; he was credited with a scheming, brilliant brain that lusted after power in the county, and in the same breath people spoke of him as nothing but a dull and plodding man who never rose above pettiness of penny splitting. Nobody fathomed him.

"I would like to give you another year," he repeated, as if not hearing Jim. "But unfortunately, I am not in a position to do so. This has been a poor season. I cannot afford to hold paper. I've got to take yours over, Jim."

"May the Lord have mercy on you," drawled Jim. "I don't know how you'll get anything out of it. There she lies, idle and profitless."

"I have a man who is buying it," said Craib in the selfsame tuneless, grating voice.

That stirred Jim's curiosity. "Now who's foolish enough to want it?"

"I am bound not to say," said Craib.

Jim got up, smiling. "The man must be ashamed of his lack o' discretion. All right, Craib. Sorry I've been a poor customer. But I'll be tryin' again somewhere, sometime. After I get a rest." He opened the door and looked out, wistfulness clouding his eyes. "By George, I hate to lose that little place. Won't ever find another just like it."

Craib rose, knocking the chair back by the force of his unwieldy legs. "Can't loan you any of the bank's money, Jim," he said. "But if a personal loan of a hundred dollars from me will help I'll let you have it. Unsecured. No note."

It was so unusual a proposal, coming from Craib, that Jim Chaffee was plainly

astonished. "Well, that's handsome. Maybe I'll take that offer. Let you know later."

"All right," grunted Craib, busy with his map again.

Jim went out, nodding at Mark Eagle. The teller's eyes followed the rangy cowpuncher all the way to the street. And long after, Mark Eagle tapped his counter with an idle pen, murky eyes squinting at some remote vision.

WITHIN twenty paces Jim Chaffee confronted three entirely dissimilar gentlemen whom he knew very well. Mack Moran, Dad Satterlee, and William Woolfridge, who owned an outfit adjoining Satterlee, broke through the crowded sidewalk. Mack Moran, on sight of Jim, threw a hand over his face and appeared to stagger back from the shock. Oh, look at the stranger from the brush! Mama, what a wreck!" He came forward, Irish face split from ear to ear. "How, Jim!"

"You're drunk," grinned Jim.

"I ain't drunk," was Moran's severe retort. "I ain't even intoxicated. Been lookin' all over hell's half acre—"

Satterlee, a stout man with iron-shot hair rumbled an abrupt question. "When did you get in?" Woolfridge contented himself with a bare nod and found interest somewhere else. Jim shook hands with his old boss and before he could answer the question Satterlee shot another at him. "Enterin' the buckin' tomorrow?"

"Shore he is," chimed Mack Moran. "And there goes yore hundred dollars first money."

"I dunno," said Jim. "Ain't rode for a spell."

"Get in it," urged Satterlee. "Theodorik Perrine's ridin'."

All three of them watched Jim with considerable interest. He reached for his tobacco, quite grave. "I've heard the name before," he murmured. "Maybe I'll ride." Satterlee grunted something and moved away with Woolfridge. But Mack Moran placed a great hand around Jim Chaffee's arm and pulled him down the street.

"We'll settle this right now. Yo're ridin'." He took off his hat and rubbed his fiery red hair. He looked up to Jim—for he was a short and wiry puncher, this Mack Moran, and filled with dynamite—and chuckled to himself. "I been like a chicken minus a head all day. By gosh, I'm glad to see yore homely mug. Let's do somethin', let's rip up a few boards."

Jim stopped, eyes fastened on a sign freshly painted above a building. Announcing to all the world in red letters the following:

ROARING HORSE IRRIGATION AND RECLAMATION CORPORATION.

"How long's that been there," Jim asked. "What is it, Mack?"

"I dunno. Some new fangled outfit come in here a few weeks back. They's a dude in charge that calls himself secretary. In plainer words, an ordinary pen pusher. What's behind it I dunno. But they been buyin' land. Doin' a good business at that. Bad year. Small folks are sellin'. What does the aforesaid corporation want with land that's worth about four bits to the acre? I dunno. Here's where you sign up."

He led Chaffee into a hardware store where all contestants applied for places in the morrow's rodeo. Chaffee signed. But when the gentleman in charge of the formalities asked for the customary ten-dollar fee he stared blankly at Mack. "I forgot that. Ain't got ten dollars."

"I have," said Moran and peeled the sum from his pocket. He slapped it down. "And I'll state it'll bring a hundred iron men back with it tomorrow night."

The gentleman behind the counter accepted the ten, but not the comment. He looked at Chaffee curiously. "Theodorik Perrine's ridin'."

"The name," replied Jim, "is familiar."

The partners went out. Mack suggested it was time to eat and they started back through the crowd to a restaurant. "Jim," Mack asked, "have you seen Theodorik yet?"

"No, I ain't had the pleasure for some months."

"Well, he's ornerier than ever. If you could cross a skunk, a grizzly and a rattlesnake you'd have friend Theodorik."

"It'll be interestin' to see him again," drawled Jim. His head came up and he gripped Mack Moran's arm so tightly that the latter jumped. "Walk slow," breathed Jim Chaffee fiercely. "Walk slow like you was just wastin' time."

"Yeah, but—"

"Shut up!"

WILLIAM WOOLFRIDGE came toward them, beside him walked the girl Jim had seen earlier in the afternoon. She had a parasol raised against the late afternoon's sun and her white chin was tipped to Woolfridge. She was talking gaily and her free hand made graceful gestures, gestures that seemed to flow into her words and give color to them. Chaffee, venturing one direct glance, saw the robust freedom of her and the assured carriage she owned. Everything about the girl stamped her as belonging to a world remote from this dusty old cattle town. Her eyes, he decided, were not hazel but rather gray and set broad in a fine brow. He muttered something to Mack and the latter, puzzled by all this, blurted a question loud enough to wake the dead. "Don't mumble thataway. What was you tryin' to say anyhow?" Then the girl walked by, her head erect and her attention straight to the front. She had not seen Jim Chaffee. Or that was the impression he gathered.

"Who is that girl?" demanded Jim, far removed from his habitual calm.

"Great snakes, don't bite me in the neck," grumbled Mack. "Her name's Gay Thatcher. She's from the capital, takin' in our rodeo as a sorter pilgrim."

"A bright spot on this gray old street," murmured Jim. "A thoroughbred. Gay. Ain't that a pretty name, Mack? Ain't it a pretty name, now?" He turned to his partner, glowering. "Any relation to that coyote Woolfridge? The sun-of-a-gun looked like he owned her. Any relation?"

"How do I know?" protested Mack. "But I don't figger so. She come with a party of society folks on the special train. Town's full of them. La-de-da ladies an' slick-eared gents. They's to be a grand ball at the Gusher tomorrow night. Woolfridge is the high card dude around these parts with them people. You and me is only rough, rude cow persons. But Woolfridge ain't only a rancher, he's got connections in genteel down-territory famblies. He's rich, he uses lots uh big words, and he knows the difference between pie fork and meat fork. I heard somebody say that. What is said difference, Jim?"

"Gay—by George that's a pretty name. Mack, I've got to meet her."

"Ha!" snorted Mack, and considered that sufficiently devastating. He started to pull Jim into the restaurant, Josiah Craib's gaunt and bony frame stepped around the pair. The banker had his hands clasped tightly behind him and his long face bent forward on his neck like the beak of a droopy vulture. He drew Jim's attention by a jerk of his head.

"About that personal loan I mentioned, Jim. I spoke a little prematurely. I will have to withdraw the offer. Very sorry."

"That's all right," said Jim gravely. "I don't—" But Craib was gone, ploughing a straight path through the crowd.

"He's crooked as a snake's shadder," grumbled Mack. "What was he talkin' about?"

"Nothing," said Jim. "I've got to meet her." They entered the restaurant.

JIM CHAFFEE thought Gay Thatcher had not seen him; but she had clearly discovered the excitement simmering in his eyes as she passed by. And he would have been immensely interested to know that later in the night she stood in her hotel room and looked out of the window and across the street to where he stood. The Melotte family was in town. Lily Melotte and a pair of other girls had cornered Jim in front of Tilton's drygoods store. He had his hat off and was smiling at the group; there was something about him at the moment quite gracefully gallant. Lily Molette touched his arm with a certain air of possession and at that Gay Thatcher drew back from the window and raised her sturdy shoulders.

"They tell me he is a lady's man," said she to herself. "It seems so. But I have never seen a finer face. He carries himself so surely, yet there isn't an ounce of swagger about him. I wonder if he will try to meet me again?"

With that question, truly a feminine one, she crossed to the table and began to write a report to the governor. It was not a social note. It was a note of sober business; and the words she used sounded strangely like those of an equal to an equal. Gay Thatcher was in Roaring Horse ostensibly to attend the rodeo; but in reality it was to find out certain things about certain men. Her dress, her manners, and her beauty was distinctly feminine, yet beneath this was a sharp mind and a store of experience surpassing that of many a man. Gay Thatcher was a free lance at present in the service of the chief executive of the Territory.

Chapter II

A SECRET MEETING

WILLIAM W. WOOLFRIDGE was not an impressive man in the open air; in fact, he was apt to take on a neutral color when surrounded by neighbors. It required four walls and a little furniture to draw him out. With a desk in front of him and a few sheets of business to trap his attention he slowly acquired a distinct personality and threw off an air of authority that his subordinates were quick to sense and even more quick to obey. There is no autocrat like the man who feels himself lacking in outward command.

Perhaps it was his face that made him seem negative. It was a smooth and pink face and discreetly suggesting freckles. He wore riding breeches and cordovan boots and all his clothes matched in shade and were scrupulously pressed. His hands were like those of a musician. He had the air of eating well, and indeed his ranch kitchen was stocked with victuals the natives of the country never heard of, and wouldn't have eaten if they had. He looked nothing at all like a cattleman, but he owned more acres than Dad Satterlee, hired thirty punchers in season, and sported a very modern ranch-house that was run by Filipino boys in white jackets.

About nine o'clock of the evening, William W. Woolfridge entered the hotel and walked as inconspicuously as possible up the stairs, letting himself into a room occupied by two other gentlemen. One was a visitor from down-territory, the other was Josiah Craib. And after a few preliminary words, fitly preceded by a measure of rye, the gentleman from down-territory, whose name was on the hotel register as T. Q. Bangor, came to the issues.

"A fortunate thing, Woolfridge, that this rodeo gave me an excuse to come up here and see you. The less of fuss the better. And written correspondence won't do at this stage of the game. It may interest you to know that our engineers have given me some very favorable estimates."

"Good enough," replied Woolfridge. Though a fortune hinged on that statement he took it with an urbane calm. "Put it a little more exactly, will you?"

At this point Craib rose, gaunt body casting a grotesque shadow against the wall. "You don't need me. I'll go back to my office." With a nod to each of them he went out, closing the door softly behind him.

Bangor proceeded. "Your banker friend gives me an uneasy, insecure feeling. What does the man think about?"

"God knows," said Woolfridge. "It doesn't matter. He's tied to me. Go on."

"I didn't put the specific case before our engineers," explained Bangor. "I made it an arbitrary and theoretical proposition to keep them off the track. Until the big news breaks we want no leaks. But they assure me of this point, to divert enough water from the proposed power dam for irrigation purposes will be all right. It depends on the following factors—that the number of acres to be irrigated does not require more than so many acre-feet of water, that the dam is high enough and the back basin great enough to take care of a set minimum for generation of electrical current. I have all the figures with me. It checks very well with the reserve we will be carrying when the Roaring Horse project goes through. I'll give you the estimate sheet to run over. But there are a lot of angles to this thing and I wish you'd go through your end of it in a-b-c order for my own satisfaction."

Woolfridge drew a map from his pocket and unfolded it on the bed; it covered the Roaring Horse country between peaks and western alkali wastes, between the Roaring Horse canyon and town, and had been drawn especially for Woolfridge by surveyors. He laid a finger on it. "All you see here is desert grazing land. Intrinsically worth whatever you've got to pay for it. Some fifty cents an acre, some ten dollars. All of it as dry as a bone except for drilled wells and two small creeks. The Roaring Horse absorbs everything. At present this land is good for nothing but cattle. Less than eleven inches of rainfall a year on it. That's the first fundamental proposition. The second proposition is that this land is astonishingly fertile; it will grow absolutely anything if irrigated. I've tested it. The third proposition is that we've had three bad cattle years here with another in prospect and ranchers are discouraged and willing to sell. I have quietly bought a lot of range, through my dummy company next door. I will continue to buy until I have an almost solid strip along the canyon within easy irrigating

distance. The control will be absolutely mine. I will irrigate it, divide it into small farms and sell. Ten-dollar range land with water on it is worth, in this district, from fifty to a hundred and fifty dollars an acre."

Bangor interrupted. "Woolfridge, have you any idea of what it costs to install an irrigation system? You had better figure carefully. One unforeseen item can lay you flat on your back—break you in a week."

WOOLFRIDGE smiled, still the mild, soft-fleshed man. "Let's check over the items. First is the dam. You are building it for a power dam, that doesn't cost me a penny. You will charge a nominal sum for the use of the water later, but that falls on the homesteader as a part of his upkeep charges. Second item is the main ditch. And outside of one piece of digging about three hundred yards long that won't cost me anything either. Look here."

He traced a shaded line on the map, a line that started at the Roaring Horse canyon and worked parallel to it, though angling away slightly as it traveled. "There is a gulley that in prehistoric days was a good sized creek. Its mouth comes within three hundred yards of the canyon rim and that piece has been somehow overlain with soil. It travels downhill with the general contour of the country for ten miles, sliding off from the rim. When your dam is built that gulley's mouth, shoveled out, will tap your basin, take the water and carry it by gravity all those ten miles. The soil is hard underneath, no porous sands to absorb water. I've had that tested. And there's my main ditch."

Bangor shook his head. "Woolfridge, you're the luckiest man I know about."

Something of the mildness went from Woolfridge. His eyes turned cold and those smooth cheeks became distinctly hard. All at once he was a different individual, aggressive and slightly overbearing. "Not lucky, Bangor. I have been studying this five years. One more item—the laterals off the main canal. They will go in as I sell the ranches. I have a mechanical digger in mind that will slash them out of the ground in no time at all. And there is the cost of it. Advertising, of course, will cost. Buying these present ranchers out will cost. But the whole sum is nothing when compared to what I expect to make. I won't go into figures except to say that from this one angle I expect to make a quarter million."

"We are the means of supplying you with a nice fortune," said Bangor, not overly enthused.

Woolfridge had been watching his man closely, gauging his reactions. And the coldness became more pronounced and his speech faster and far more unfriendly. "I expected some such reply, Bangor. I am prepared to meet it. I said I have studied this five years. It depended wholly on somebody building a dam on the Roaring Horse. Your company had to get a good water site and I called it to your attention. You will be carrying power a great deal less far than you would in any other available site. Moreover, when you got in trouble with Bi-State Power I saw to it that my block of shares was instrumental in giving you the victory. I helped you. I expect help in return."

"Your help had definite strings attached to it," reminded Bangor. "It still has strings attached to it."

"I believe in protecting myself," was Woolfridge's quiet answer. "This isn't charity. You will make money from the deal. Not only in water rent but in the development of this region. Personally I have bought controlling interest in the bank, in a warehouse and I will soon control the major mercantile establishment here. All through my dummy corporation. I expect in time to build up a marketing organization. Long after I take my first profit I will be taking a tithe in the general prosperity."

"You let nothing past you, Woolfridge."

"I have studied it a long time, and very carefully," said Woolfridge. "There is yet one difficult barrier to cross. I have got to buy out Satterlee or the whole thing falls to pieces. His land cuts my project in two. The ditch runs across it; and the man would cut off his right arm before he'd see the cattle range split into homesteads. So I have got to take him out of the game."

"From what I saw of him," suggested Bangor, "he looks both prosperous and stubborn."

"He is both," agreed Woolfridge. "But all men have a price. Somewhere up the scale I'll find his. Now we must work quietly and never let a hint get out.

You don't know how cattleland hates the idea of small farms. They'd block me if they understood what is going on. The name of my dummy company—they wonder who is behind it—seems like a big joke to them. They can't possibly understand how this country ever will get irrigation. They don't want it."

"Who are you taking in with you to help out and share profits?"

"Nobody. When I want a thing done I do it myself. I never let another man see my hand unnecessarily. And I take what rewards I get."

IN SAYING that the core of his nature broke through the neutral wrappings and lay exposed. His round cheeks were flushed and hard; and there was a slanting Oriental cast to his eyes that seemed to defy Bangor's power of analysis. Bangor saw part of his hidden coldness and his hidden purpose, but there was still some laten explosive force beyond sight. It was to him an uncomfortable moment and he broke it as quickly as he could.

"We should have an answer to our applications in Washington. That's a formality. It will go through. And so will our business with the Territorial engineer. You had better get your necessary legal business in order as well."

"I am taking care of that," said Woolfridge. Bangor had the uneasy feeling that the man had taken care of a great many things. He knew Woolfridge very well, he knew his approximate wealth and his connections. Yet from time to time Woolfridge surprised him by producing still another weapon out of the case. Perhaps a strategic bulk of stock, perhaps a friendly official.

"Well," went on Bangor, "when you are ready to break the news let me know. I'll hold off until then. By the way, the Governor is preparing to lay a series of distinctly radical reform measures before the ensuing legislature. I don't like it. But we'll beat them."

"Give the Governor my regards," was Woolfridge's ironic comment. "Two years from now I'll send him back to private life."

"How?" was Bangors startled question.

Woolfridge shrugged his shoulders and motioned to the bottle. The interview was over. They drank quite in silence and Woolfridge prepared to go. By the door he turned for a last word. "See you in the morning. You are sitting down front. It will be very interesting. Watch a man named Jim Chaffee. It will repay you. He has a terrific reputation for ability in these parts." He seemed to thaw and drop back to his inconspicuous rôle. "By the way, Gay Thatcher is an extraordinarily charming lady. Where is she from?"

"Don't know," said Bangor. "She's been socially up around the capital this fall. Her past seems to be entirely her own business. But she walks through the best doors."

"I should think so," murmured Woolfridge and let himself out.

Bangor waited a spell. Then he pulled off his shoes and stared a long, long interval at the wall. His thoughts seemed to displease him.

WILLIAM WELLS WOOLFridge went down the plush carpeted stairway of the Gusher and paused in the lobby, beneath a crystal chandelier. The Gusher was not a modern hotel; its frame dated back to an ancient army barracks. But recently unknown capital had taken the place and remodeled it. It glittered cheerfully of a night, its walls were loaded with murals and its woodwork ran to fancy scrolls and jigsaw figures. Each room on the lower floor opened grandly into another, lobby, dining hall and gaming parlor. And each room was differently colored and took its name from that color. Most appropriately the gaming parlor was the Gold room and after a moment observation of the tip of a fresh cigar, Woolfridge turned into it, seeming pleased at the comfortable crowd there gathered. It should have pleased him. It was his hotel, though this was another undercover possession, and the Gold room was his idea. It netted him money, it furnished a cosmopolitan air to the town, and public sentiment in no wise disapproved. The Gold room was thoroughly genteel and women sometimes stood at the doorway looking on. There was a bar beyond a partition, but not a drop of liquor entered the precincts of this room. Thirsty men went out to the bar.

The playing had started, but Woolfridge found Dan Satterlee leaning idly against a wall, talking politics to French Melotte, looking for all the world like a man who had absolutely no interest in

the click of chips or the slight shuffle of the cards. Dad was an inveterate poker player, but he went about it casually. Woolfridge tapped him on the arm and nodded toward the lobby. Satterlee followed, his red, blunt face shining honestly against the light. His hair was the color of iron and his eyes were like twin steel disks. But Satterlee liked to laugh and the echo of it rang strong and free wherever he was.

"Nice crowd," said Dad, scanning the lobby.

"That's right," agreed Woolfridge. "About that proposition of mine—"

"Oh, hell, I thought you had somethin' to tell me about the rodeo. Don't bother me with any more offers."

"I will meet any reasonable price you set, Satterlee," insisted Woolfridge. "I'm serious."

"Yuh? Son, if I set a price it wouldn't be nowise reasonable. And that's likewise serious. What would me and my wife do with a lot of money and no place to go? Shucks, you ain't talkin' to a poor man."

"Now you're trying to draw me into something else," said Woolfridge, mildly. "I don't care what you do with the money. Buy a battleship and tour the world. It may sound like nonsense to you, but I want your range worse than you want it. I want it bad enough to pay a very stiff sum. And I have always found that a man could buy anything if he wanted it sufficiently. I have also found that all men will sell at their price. I'm trying to find your price."

"Great Shades," snorted Dad Satterlee. "You got the damndest way of dickerin' I ever heard tell of. Same as sayin' I can keep on talkin' but you'll get my land by and by."

"I'm trying to find your price."

"Well, I'll set a price high enough to keep you off," said Dad. Immediately he checked himself and looked into Woolfridge's face with a sharp, shrewd penetration. "No, I won't let you run me into any corral like that, either. Might take me up. You're foxy, but you ain't got good sense tryin' to extend your range in a bad year. Not when you got to pay boom prices. What's in the back of your coco, anyhow?"

"Just what I told you," said Woolfridge, patiently. "I want to be the kingpin in this piece of country. If a man can afford to nurse his vanity, why not?"

Satterlee bit into his cigar and became mellow. "Now listen. I was born here. I courted my wife here and I buried three kids out yonder on a green little knoll. I made money here and I've sorter put down my roots 'way deep. Don't you talk dicker to me any more, son. I'm finished. All you and me can talk about is horses and buckers tomorrow. Believe I'll sit in a judicious game."

He left Woolfridge, eyes sparkling with the robust anticipation of battle. Woolfridge watched him settle into a vacant table and crook his fingers at sundry prospects. There was one particular man who seemed on the verge of joining this new game; but Woolfridge caught that man's eye and held it for a fraction of a moment. He turned into the street and walked into the shadows by the livery stable. In a little while somebody drew abreast him, obscured by the darkness. "What was it, Mister Woolfridge?" a voice asked.

"Before you sat in that game with Satterlee," murmured Woolfridge, "I wanted to tell you to tighten up your game. Tighten it up, Clyde. Do you understand? Play for Satterlee and let the others win or lose. But play for Satterlee."

A moment's silence. "You told me when you brought me into this country Mr. Woolfridge, I was to play an absolutely straight game."

"So I did, and so you have. And you have built up a reputation for being square. Which is exactly what I wanted you to do. Now go back there and do as I tell you. I have been nursing you along for this particular time. Use all the tricks in your bag, Clyde, which are manifold. That's all."

"How much have I got behind me to do this?"

"You are free to sign your I. O. U.'s up to twenty thousand. I'll privately protect you in any event you have to meet any such obligation. Boost the play high. Satterlee's feeling good. Now go back there and win!"

"All right—"

Behind them was the smashing of glass and one sharp explosion. They turned to see a saloon door erupt a vast and towering form. And down the street came a mighty wailing cry, weird and full-throated and savage; a cry that seemed to come from some stricken beast in the rage of death. It poured along the thor-

oughfare, striking an unaccountable chill into the heart of many a listener. Clyde the gambler swore nervously, retreating.

"Great good God, what's that?"

"That's Theodorik Perrine, twisting his own tail for tomorrow's contest."

Chapter III

A DUEL OF THE ARENA

THE flag was up, the cowboy band had finished the last bar of the national anthem. The crowd in the grandstands settled back, a pistol cracked at the far turn of the track and a dozen ponies came battering down the main stretch on the opening relay of the rodeo. Excitement roared from one end of the field to the other. The crowd was up again and yelling encouragement to the riders swirling through the dust. Yellow and red flashed in the sun, there was a sudden melee at the opposite turn of the track and a pony went down, rider turning through the air. A sigh like the passage of wind swept the onlookers. Then the race was over and the spilled rider sat up and waved his hand at his departing horse. Again a pistol cracked. The show was on.

The rodeo roustabouts were in the center of the field with the first of the bucking horses, each brute snubbed up to a roustabout's saddle horn. Blindfolds were on and men went about the ticklish business of saddling. Jim Chaffee stood at one side of the arena smoking a cigarette and looking over the fence to some far distant point of the horizon. His long legs were spread slightly apart, his blue neckpiece fluttered slightly to the wind, and his uptilted hat let the sun fall fully on his lean, bronzed cheeks. His eyes were half closed, the cigarette drooped from a corner of his thin lips. It was a splendid picture of a man relaxed and indifferent; he seemed entirely forgetful at the moment of the part he was about to play. And in truth he was. Looking northward, gravely wistful of features, he was seeing in his mind the cabin by the creek and the tall cottonwoods surrounding it. It didn't seem right that so cheerful and tucked-in a place should be lying tenantless. There ought to be a fire in the stove and somebody ought to be out fixing that broken corral pole. And he was saying, "I never will find another like it. Not in a thousand years."

Gay Thatcher saw him there and stored the picture in her memory. Leaning forward from the foremost box in the stands she drew the attention of William W. Woolfridge.

"Is he riding today?" she asked.

Woolfridge was on this day one of the three judges. At present he sat on his horse beside the other two. French Melotte and Dad Satterlee, waiting for the roustabouts to get the buckers ready. He turned at her question. "Who? Chaffee —yes, he's riding, Miss Gay. He has some reputation for that sort of thing in this country."

"He looks—picturesque," said Gay, and then inwardly protested at her own use of the word. It sounds exactly like what a tourist would say. She wasn't a tourist and she hadn't meant that. "I mean he looks exactly like a Westerner should look."

Woolfridge smiled. "Perhaps there's a little grandstand gesture in that pose. Most of the boys like to show off before the crowd."

Dad Satterlee had his attention on the roustabouts, but he caught that last sentence and turned suddenly. "What you talkin' about, son? Chaffee don't play to the crowd. He ain't built that way. Never was, never will. He wasn't even figurin' on competin' this year. That ranch of his sorter ties him down."

"He no longer has it," corrected Woolfridge, amused. "He lost it. The bank took it over yesterday."

"Oh," said Gay, instantly sorry.

Satterlee's bulldog face showed disbelief. "What's that? You're kiddin' us, Woolfridge. He come to me for help first. He told me right off."

"I happen to know," replied Woolfridge. He was so quietly positive about it that Dad Satterlee's red cheeks grew crimson.

"Of all the dum fool things! By Jupiter, if I don't tear the hide offen him! Three years' work gone up the spout and he's too doggone proud to ask me for a boost! Wait till I lay a tongue on the young stiff-back!"

Gay's attention was attracted elsewhere. "Who is that enormous man coming through the side gate?"

All three judges looked. All three exchanged glances. "His name is eodorik Perrine," said Woolfridge, voice changing slightly.

"What a mountain he is," breathed the girl. "What a peculiar walk!"

Theodorik Perrine marched slowly into the field, and the crowd, seeing that his course took him directly in front of Jim Chaffee, fixed its attention upon the pair and grew silent. Every soul in the Roaring Horse country understood the antagonism, bitter and profound, that lay between the two. It had existed since the first meeting, years ago, and through those years the Roaring Horse country had seen the breach widen, had witnessed the tentative crossing of wills, the duels each staged at the rodeos, the slow piling up of temper in the men, auguring some tremendous and terrific struggle that one day must surely come. It was ordained. Somebody behind Gay whispered, "Those boys are pointed towards each other again. Some day there'll be an almighty big explosion. It can't last much longer like this." Gay, unconsciously doubling her small fists, leaned forward and studied Jim Chaffee's fine lean face.

CHAFFEE had his back to the approaching Perrine. Yet he felt the silence coming over the crowd and he felt Perrine's presence. He took a final draw on the cigarette and tipped his head to the distant horizon. The cigarette veered through the air and Jim, all muscles seeming slack, turned casually about, thumbs hooking into his belt.

The man behind Gay drew a deep breath, exclaiming, "Look how slow and easy he does it. Those fellows don't make any quick motions when they meet. By the Lord, Jim Chaffee's a sight to watch. Now hold on to yourself."

Theodorik Perrine advanced, boots sliding across the soft earth with that particularly sinuous motion so much a part of him. His knees buckled with each step as if the weight of his body pressed him down and his hands, traveling back and forth were turned so that the palms brushed thigh and thigh at every swing. Theodorik Perrine's features were all bold and rounding and supported by massive bones that seemed too thick to be broken. His Stetson was lowered, with a braided rawhide passing from it under his chin; and his eyes were a dull, slate-colored pair of windows that clouded up and concealed the fires burning within the recesses of his vast being. Yet the plain physical impact of his glance was like a blow. A brooding, sullen and unfathomable man with a wild record behind him.

Jim Chaffee's lids drooped and his lips pinched in until they made a thin line beneath the swooping nose. And he waited until the lumbering giant came to a stand five yards away. Seldom did either man come closer of his own will. Perrine poked a thumb against the brim of his hat and shot it upward, clearing his face. He didn't immediately speak; first he took a leisured chew of tobacco and ground it solidly between his teeth, collecting one by one the exact words he wanted to use. In the end they came out of him, with a world of cold belligerence.

"Got to buck again' you this year, uh?"

"I reckon, Perrine," Chaffee replied.

Silence. The summoning up of more words. The same mutter and rumble, the same dead and stony look. "I'm takin' first this year, Chaffee."

"Maybe."

"To hell with yore mebbe," said Theodorik Perrine, boosting the words truculently across the intervals.

"I'm repeatin' the same word," drawled Chaffee.

"I'd go a thousand miles to lick yuh," Perrine snarled.

"I wouldn't go that far, speakin' for myself," said Chaffee.

"Yore trail runs too close to mine. Some day they'll cross. Ever think of that, Chaffee?"

"It's marked in the calendar," said Chaffee, solemnly.

All activity seemed to have halted around the arena, the crowd was quite still, and even the three judges tarried a moment. For this was a scene that engrossed Roaring Horse, that gripped every man's imagination. One spark flashing along the bright cold morning's air and touching the explosives.

Perrine's towering shoulders squared and his chest rose. His slate-colored eyes cleared for a moment and Jim Chaffee saw the volcanic fire flickering far down within them. Then Theodorik Perrine moved and walked on down the arena, circling and placing behind the man he both hated and respected more profoundly than any other.

Gay Thatcher's fists ached with the pressure she had unknowingly put on them. Her throat hurt. She heard the man behind release a long-held breath and at the same moment speak in a high-pitched accent, "Not this time. But blamed soon. This can't go on much longer. Chaffee's lightin' a cigarette, and

I'll bet his fingers ain't shakin'. I'd give a million dollars for his nerves." Gay leaned forward, looking to Dad Satterlee. "What is it—why is it?"

Satterlee gathered his reins. "Two kinds of men—poison to each other, ma'm. Both at the top o' the heap. And in such case they ain't room for but one. Come on, boys. Time for the ball to roll."

A RIDER was up, high against the sun. Before the girl could adjust herself Satterlee's gun cracked and the ride was over. Action swirled out there in the bright oval. Another puncher was up, and then down in the dust while hoofs flailed across his body. Pickup men streamed away, new buckers came in. Conversation boiled around her as she sat forward, chin cupped in one hand, still watching Jim Chaffee.

Presently her attention was recalled by the mention of Perrine's name and she saw the man's vast frame settling into a saddle. The judges were spreading out, each to command a different view of that ride. The horse surged away, breaking in two it seemed to her. Yet above the pounding and the spurts of dust and the dynamic thrusts of the brute, Perrine sat like a rock, heels roving fore and aft, one arm free, voice sounding over the field and striking away back in the stands. Nothing, it appeared to Gay, could ever move that giant. Partisan spirit took hold of her and she wondered how Jim Chaffee would fare. The man behind was volunteering more information.

"Chaffee up on Lovey-Dovey. There's a tough one. Perrine made a nice ride. Always does. Jim's got to show well on that double-jointed brute. Now watch the difference in style. Perrine bears down, Jim goes it fancy."

Gay thought Chaffee looked directly at her, but the sun was in her eyes and she couldn't be sure. He threw away his cigarette, long arm rippling outward, and turned toward Lovey-Dovey. From that moment onward Gay saw nor heard anything around her. Chaffee's rangy body was beside the horse and his hands were roving along the cinches. Lovey-Dovey struck with venom and danced away, dragging the snubbing horse along the arena. The roustabout bent, saying something to Chaffee; and Gay saw the latter look up and shake his head.

Chaffee was unsmiling; and again he touched the cinches and seemed to be soothing the animal. A foot went cautiously into the stirrup. He was up in one lithe, graceful pull. He was looking down at the stirrups and settling his feet into them; he had the hackamore rope in his hand, free arm taking up the slack and moving sinuously here and there about Lovey-Dovey's head. Gay gripped the stand railing, feeling the suspense of those dragging moments. It seemed a long while to her, yet in reality it was but a moment. Then Jim Chaffee's arm was far above him and Lovey-Dovey had reared on its hind feet and launched the fight.

Thereafter her eyes were filled with a piece of weaving, raw beauty. Man and horse were one. Jim Chaffee sat securely, yet swaying to each immeasurably violent jolt. Silver flashed in the sun, the brown dust came jetting up. She saw Chaffee far over, she saw the horse curling, and then she thought the man was gone. It was a trick of eyes burdened with those swift and continuous flashes of action. Chaffee was yet riding, matching rhythm with rhythm, still touching neck and flank with his spurs. Lovey-Dovey's four hoofs were off the ground and Chaffee was on a lonely seat above the wings of the dust. Gay caught that picture and never thereafter forgot it—Jim Chaffee with his long arm above him, black hair gleaming, rein arm crooked rigidly, and his lean face looking down between the ears of Lovey-Dovey with the expression of a man whose whole will was thrown out to battle.

"Why don't they fire the gun!"

She thought somebody else had said that. But she said it; nor did she know that she was on her feet, leaning far over the rail. The gun broke the spell. Pick-up men streamed in and lifted Lovey-Dovey's head. Jim Chaffee slid neatly out of his perch and across a pick-up man's horse to the ground. Gay watched him stride over the dirt, legs far apart and body still weaving a little from the fight. But he was smiling. The sharp, almost severe lines of his face were gone, giving him a reckless and exuberant air. He passed through a side gate without turning his head, leaving Gay Thatcher a little less interested in the succeeding rides. Already another man was up. The talkative individual behind her offered somebody a bet.

"It'll be the same as last year. Perrine and Chaffee battling it out this afternoon

for the money. Don't he put on a pretty show?"

Shortly before noon the girl slipped away and went back to the hotel. As she turned in she happened to glance on down the street and saw Jim Chaffee staring up at a building wall. She wondered what drew his interest. There was nothing on the wall but a sign: ROARING HORSE IRRIGATION AND RECLAMATION CORPORATION.

DIRECTLY after dinner, Mack Moran ran into Jim Chaffee with a message. "Dad Satterlee wants to see you now, at the Gusher. Where you been?"

"Investigatin' that new-fangled corporation," said Jim Chaffee, and let it ride at that. They walked down the street and found Dad Satterlee on the hotel steps, surrounded by the other two judges and lesser town dignitaries. Satterlee broke away from the conversation to survey Chaffee with a certain truculence. "You're ridin' Mixup and Fireball this afternoon."

"I'm obliged for the news," drawled Chaffee.

"Mebbe you won't be later," grunted Satterlee. "We are givin' you these horses to spike any gossip about favoritism." He grew redder and homelier. "I hear you lost yore ranch."

"Nothin' spreads like bad news."

"Yuh darn, skittle-minded fool!" bellowed Satterlee. "What did I tell you away back in the beginnin' about help? Ain't I yore next door neighbor?"

"Charity is a noble thing," replied Jim Chaffee.

"Who said anything about charity?" roared Satterlee. "There's some more of yore doggone pride. You always was a stiff-brimmed idiot. I take this affair as plumb unfriendly on your part, Jim. What's a neighbor for? Roaring Horse has got to a hell of a pass when it abides by the rules of seven percent mortgages. I'm goin' down to the bank and settle that myself."

"No. Too late. Somebody's already assumed it."

"Who?"

"Craib wasn't in a position to reveal the said person," said Jim.

Satterlee revolved the information angrily around his mind. Once his eyes roamed down the street to the sign of the Irrigation and Reclamation Corporation; then he directed his glance to William W. Woolfridge. The latter was listening to all this and offering no comment. He met Satterlee's unspoken question with the same bland and neutral countenance. The owner of the Stirrup S moved his shoulders as if irked by an unseen pressure. "This used to be a white man's land. Looks like it's changin'. Well, Jim, you're comin' back to my outfit as peeler again. Don't consider that charity, do you?"

"I'd reckon not," answered Chaffee, smiling. "That's hard work."

Chaffee turned away with Mack Moran. They traveled leisurely and silently back toward the arena and settled down against a pile of baled hay adjoining the corrals. Cigarette smoke curled into the bright crisp air. Mack Moran was not wholly pleased.

"Mixup and Fireball. Two loads of grief. Why don't they give Theodorik Perrine one o' those monsters? Looks 'sif you got to ride all the outlaws to make a place. Mixup is bad enough, but this Fireball brute is unhealthy distinct. I'd ruther steal a hundred dollars than fork him to win it."

"Who do you figger is behind this irrigation corporation doo-ratchet?" asked Chaffee, idly scanning the azure sky.

"I told you I didn't have no idea."

"It's peculiar," went on Chaffee. "I walked in to have a look. They's a fellow in charge. But he ain't the main push. Why? He wears a white collar, but they's a hole in it. I got a look at his shoes and they're run down at the heels. He ain't no capitalist. He's a dummy. I've got a feelin'."

"What kind?"

CHAFFEE drew a long breath of smoke, his eyes narrowing. "Somethin's goin' to happen around here pretty soon. There's that corporation. A mystery. Why should anybody want to go about buyin' land so doggone devious? Same applies to whoever bought my little piece. Now there's this half-dude Woolfridge. Tryin' to buy Satterlee out of the country."

"Shucks, I didn't know that," interposed Mack Moran in surprise.

"I just discovered it. But that ain't but half the kernel in the peanut. Notice the sky limit on the poker last night? That lily fingered fellow kept boostin' Satterlee till the cowbells rang. Took considerable money away from the old gent at

that. Maybe will take some more tonight. Satterlee's hard to beat, too, in a level game. Mack, that lily finger dude is bent in several places."

"Uh?"

"Crooked. I'm goin' to watch a little closer tonight. And here's Theodorik Perrine in town, howlin' like a dyin' wolf. He's come to fight me, as usual. But what's his gang doin' here with him? This town never did tolerate the presence of Sleepy Slade before. He's outlawed. But here he is, big as life. And the sheriff ain't doin' anything about it. Any time before this Sleepy and most of the rest of Theodorik's gang would be in the clink, writin' poetry on the walls. Consider that in your wheat papers." He leaned forward, growing tremendously earnest. "Mack, things are lining up around here. Unbeknownst to us. And there'll be one roarin' time when the lid's pulled off. I'm feelin' it in my bones. I *know* it."

"I wouldn't mind a little excitement," said Mack Moran; and his white teeth flashed.

"You'll get it," was Chaffee's grim answer. "Time to ease into the arena." He rose and walked around the corrals, casting one sharp glance at a solid buckskin horse crowded against the bars. "I got a lot of respect for you, Mister Fireball."

The stands were filled, the horses snubbed up. This afternoon the riders were fewer, for the morning's bucking had eliminated the unskilled. Within the hour the second rides would be over and the choice narrowed down to the three best men. And in the third rides would emerge that individual who had proved himself entitled to first place. Roaring Horse ran its rodeo somewhat differently than other cattle towns. There was no steer roping, no stage coach marathon, no fancy display of lariat work. At Roaring Horse one free for all pony race opened the event. After that it was bucking from first to last.

Dust rolled afresh along the ground and the roar of the crowd beat across to where Jim Chaffee stood. A man was down, and the lists narrowed by one. A great yell sailed high up and far out; and the announcer's voice struggled against the washing currents of sound. "Perrine at the left end—up on Thunder Bird. Watch out!"

Chaffee didn't watch Theodorik Perrine; it was his habit never to watch another man on these afternoon rounds. But he knew, from the crowd's reaction that Perrine had done well. Perrine always did well. Chaffee moved out to the center, hearing his own name. And as he went through the routine of inspecting cinches and hackamore, and of rubbing his hands dry of the sweat that always cropped out on his palms at the moment before swinging up, he spared one short look for the grandstand. The girl wasn't in her seat. After that and for some moments he forgot her, as well as all other things not connected with Mixup. He rode and dropped off, shaking his head to clear away the fog.

The announcer kept on the interminable droning, from rider to rider as the afternoon crept on and the shadows began to cut patterns along the arena's side. Chaffee leaned against the fence, nerves slowly tightening. It always happened thus before the final ride. A man fought the worst part of the battle before he touched the stirrups. Hell was due to pop some of these days in Roaring Horse. Things were lining up secretly, somehow throwing a premonitory shadow across the face of the land. And Fireball was a tough horse. There must be no cocksureness, never an instant's relaxing. Fireball never gave a rider a chance once that rider was so much as a hair's breadth off balance. The brute had uncanny perceptions. Jim heard the announcer.

"Jim Chaffee at the right on Fireball. Ladies and gents, watch and pray!"

Chapter IV

THE STORM BREAKS

CHAFFEE turned and walked to the far side of the arena; and though he looked once toward the grandstand to find the girl, his vision became clouded and the crowd was to him but a vast blur of faces. Something was happening inside of him; all his vital forces were mustering at one point, shutting off unnecessary drains of energy. But he did see Theodorik Perrine crouched by a track post, black face turned toward this scene, and from that he knew the man had made the third ride. This was the last duel, the deciding fight.

Fireball was in front of him, stepping around the snubbing horse. The brute's long jaw hauled against the rope and his muscles rippled uneasily across his haunches. When Jim Chaffee's hand

touched him he stopped moving on the instant and froze, all four feet spread into the soft earth and ready to make that first terrific lurch and lunge that was a part of his history.

The roustabout muttered, "rig suit yuh, Jim?" and Chaffee nodded. The pick-up men were drawn in, watching wary-eyed. Chaffee ran a hand under the cinch, studied the stirrups and hackamore. The bright sun slanted across Fireball's magnificent withers. Jim rubbed his hands along his shirt front, swept by a cold current. He stepped softly into the saddle and let his weight come easily down. He took the rope, running his hands along it time after time after an ancient custom. And he kicked his heels lightly against the stirrups until he felt them take a sure and certain seat. Nor did he ever know, as he raised his free arm in signal and lifted his chest, how cold and tight an expression he carried on his lean face. But Gay Thatcher, returned to the grandstand railing, saw it and marveled. "All right," muttered Jim. Rope and blindfold were whipped away; the roustabout vanished. Fireball's ears swooped toward the ground and Jim Chaffee rose high.

The crowd marked each move of Fireball's frenzied battle, but Jim Chaffee knew almost nothing of what the horse did, after the first four jumps. With him everything was instinct, everything was feeling. Through the years Jim Chaffee had trained himself for a duel like this, hardening himself to the punishment, disciplining his nerves and senses to work along a set pattern without his conscious bidding. There was no time to think; thinking was too slow. All that he had learned was called in now to be unconsciously applied. His sense of rhythm and balance had to serve him while his mind grew black with the riot of blood; a hundred previous lessons had to prompt his muscles to do the proper thing. Shock after shock ran along his body. His neck was being pounded by great sledges. He tasted his own blood, he felt his vitals strain at their moorings as Fireball sought to tear him apart and leave him on the ground rolling in agony. And two dim flashes of knowledge found a path into the congested cells of his brain. He was raking the brute according to regulations and it wasn't good for a man to take very much of this kind of punishment. His stomach was afire. There was a point beyond which he couldn't go.

Jim heard the pistol's report, and the swelling roar of the crowd, then the wind rushed full into his face and his thighs were being crowded by the pick-up men. Fireball's head was up, the horse was running away. Somebody shouted, "Crawl off, Jim. Yuh've had aplenty!" He vaulted over the back of that man's horse and struck the ground with both feet. And he stood quite still until the curtain of black rose from his face and the fine fresh daylight came into his eyes.

Jim's hat was on the ground twenty feet away. He went over and got it. Perrine still crouched by the post, the judges were riding abreast toward the grandstand railing, conferring together. Once more all things were distinct and Jim Chaffee saw Gay Thatcher sitting in her place. She had seen that ride. He grinned and built himself a cigarette. The sun went westering and it was a wonderful world to be in, to feel the clear air in his lungs and to see the carved beauty of the late shadows creeping around the arena. The crowd had ceased its applause, the judges were ranked abreast by the stands.

"Chaffee—Perrine— McIver — front an' center."

The three contestants marched toward the mounted judges. Dad Satterlee looked somberly at them and let the moments build up a suspense. Finally he ducked his chin toward Jim Chaffee. "It's yours. Perrine second money. McIver third honors."

Chaffee looked beyond the judges and directly at Gay Thatcher. No more than six yards separated them. Across this narrow interval these two people, absolute strangers to each other, exchanged glances. Not casual glances, but the deep and intent measuring of worth. The girl had seen him three or four times in the last twenty-four hours, yet at none of those times had he appeared as he was now. The marks of the recent punishment still cramped his face and his eyes were a profound, inky blue. She had known other men whose eyes changed color like that in stress of anger or trouble.

Chaffee looked to the judges. "Thanks."

THEODORIK PERRINE wrenched his overwhelming bulk around so that he half faced the judges and half confronted Chaffee.

Wrath blazed from his features and worked his great jowls. "Thanks be damned! This rodeo was framed. The result was signed an' sealed afore Chaffee stepped on a horse. King Solomon couldn't win a ride in Roarin' Horse if Chaffee was buckin' against him! I'm getting tired o' this favorite son business! You dudes are blind in one eye and don't see well from the other!"

"I will observe," replied Satterlee with an extraordinary and frigid politeness, "though it ain't incumbent on me to do so, that the decision was unanimous. The charge of favoritism is the squawk of a tinhorn sport. The judges decided to spike it aforehand and gave Chaffee the worst horses to ride."

"Yeah?" roared Perrine. "Well, why didn't yuh give me one o' them horses, so's *I* could make a showin'? All I got is a bunch o' distempered brood mares." He raised a fist at Satterlee, dividing the threat of it equally between that rancher and French Melotte. Jim Chaffee, abiding by the range etiquette which told him to mind his own business, observed that Theodorik Perrine entirely disregarded William W. Woolfridge. And he filed that fact away in his mind. "Yuh have been runnin' this rodeo too long!" bellowed Perrine, switching back to Satterlee. "Yuh have been runnin' this country too long. It stinks!"

"You lie," said Satterlee. "Open yore mouth again in front of me and you'll never ride in another rodeo hereabouts."

Perrine stepped back a pace, his rage condensing to a far more dangerous stage. "Let me tell you somethin', Satterlee. Yore days o' rule are about done. They's a time comin' when yuh won't have no high horse to perch on. And when that time comes I'll settle my grudges, along with a lot of others. Remember it."

"Get off the field," Dad snapped.

"You'll eat that remark soon enough," said Theodorik Perrine with a swift snapping of his heavy lips. He threw a hard glance at Jim Chaffee. "Yore days of glory are about done, likewise. I'm sayin' it."

"Any time," drawled Chaffee.

Theodorik strode across the field, knocking a roustabout out of his path with one sweep of his arm. Chaffee turned toward the gate. Gay Thatcher watched him go, holding her seat while the rest of the crowd milled around her.

"He walks straight," she murmured to herself. "No, there isn't on ounce of display or false spirit about him. But he walks as if he was the equal of any man on earth. All unconsciously. And he is. I wonder if he will try to meet me again?"

William W. Woolfridge dismounted and gave his horse to a puncher. He climbed over the railing and bowed to the girl. "It was a good show, wasn't it?"

"Splendid."

He took her arm and led her through the crowd. "Now, I can't think of you leaving so soon. This is a beautiful country. You must stay over and let me show it to you. The doors of my ranch-house are wide open. Really, I insist on it."

She threw a small, shrewd smile at him from beneath the brim of her hat. "If you are so insistent, perhaps I will."

THE Gusher blazed with lights and the dining room had been cleared for the ball. Jim Chaffee and Mack Moran stood on the porch and listened to the music. Mack was content to be where he was and no closer to what seemed to him quite a glittering and imposing affair. But Jim Chaffee saw Gay Thatcher through the door, waltzing with Woolfridge; and he was restless. Mack Moran mistook the reason for the restlessness and became somewhat scathing.

"That hundred dollars burnin' holes in yore pocket already?" he asked.

"Mack, I'd like to go in there."

"Huh. Jim, was you borned thataway or did it sorter grow gradual? You and me belong down on the dark side o' the street. Le's go there and get some hiccup syrup."

"No, I—"

"What's this——Perrine on the prod—watch out!"

Perrine it was, coming down the street on horse with ten men riding abreast and behind him. Guns roared into the night and the sidewalks were emptied of traffic immediately. Punchers broke by the partners, ducking into the hotel. Glass shattered and the cavalcade swept past, each of the band weaving recklessly in the saddle and firing at random. They stopped at the street's end, gear rattling; they came thundering back. The dust rolled up as a heavy fog and Theodorik's harsh command rang like a trumpet as he hauled around and con-

fronted Moran and Chaffee. He had been drinking, his eyes were shining like those of some creeping night animal, and his breath rose and fell in great gusts.

"I'm a wolf, Chaffee!" he yelled. "I'm a howling, crazy wolf! Who runs this town? I do when I'm of a mind to! Yore time's comin'! So's Satterlee's! I'm about at the end o' my rope. The man that tries to lay hand on me tonight dies!"

"I reckon the marshal and the sheriff are within hearin' distance," drawled Chaffee. "I guess they ain't interested—tonight."

"You interested?"

"It ain't my town, Perrine. Don't own a nickel of it."

"I got a notion to ride through that dance hall and scatter them dudes to hell an' gone."

"I guess not," murmured Chaffee.

"What's that?"

"I said I guess maybe you wouldn't care to," repeated Chaffee, spacing his words more carefully.

Perrine shifted his weight and stared somberly down upon his ancient enemy. The man was struggling with his impulses, so much was visible. The angry light simmered and was shut off by that slate curtain. "Yeah, mebbe," he decided, morosely. "Play yore game heavy while yuh can, Chaffee. It ain't lastin' much longer." He pulled his horse around and went galloping away. And presently the town heard his wild, nerve racking yell emerge from Callahan's Red Mill saloon at the western end of the street.

"He's loco," grunted Mack.

"He's twistin' his tail to make himself mad," replied Chaffee. "I know Theodorik. Pretty soon he'll pull off somethin'. I'd be pleased to know what. Mack, I'm goin' inside."

He walked through the door and across to the arch of the ball room. The music, which had ceased at the height of Theodorik Perrine's raid, was about to start again. Right inside the arch he saw Gay Thatcher seated, with Dad Satterlee and William W. Woolfridge standing before her. Satterlee discovered Chaffee and ducked his head; Chaffee, grave and casual, yet with a spark of excitement glimmering in his eyes, closed up.

"What did that renegade say?" rumbled Dad.

"The usual compliments."

"What's he up to, Jim?"

ALL three were looking at him. Gay Thatcher's hand were folded sedately in her lap and there was the faint hint of a smile lurking in the corners of her mouth.

"Feedin' himself raw meat," drawled Jim Chaffee. "About ready to go on a rampage."

"Huh," grunted Dad, and changed the subject. "Suppose you're too prosperous now to work for me. Money burnin' your hands pretty bad?"

"Be at the Stirrup S in the morning." He looked from Satterlee to Woolfridge. Neither of them seemed to catch what was in his mind. The music started and a third gentleman, some visitor from down country, came over to claim his dance with Gay Thatcher. She rose, and with just a fragment of a glance at Jim Chaffee, whirled away.

"I will be—" muttered Chaffee. "Ain't you boys schooled in introductions none?" He turned his back to the crowd and contemplated several things. Woolfridge went farther down the hall. Dad Satterlee crossed to the Gold room for a session of poker. After a few minutes Jim Chaffee decided to follow and sit in. On the verge of leaving a light voice struck a nerve right up the middle of his back.

"Are you getting discouraged?"

Gay Thatcher was beside him, her partner lingering a few yards distant. Jim took off his hat and a slow smile spread around his eyes. "I have known folks to introduce themselves," he said.

"It might save time," said the girl. "Your name is Jim Chaffee. I believe I've heard it before. My name is Gay Thatcher."

"Yes, ma'm. I know it."

"Well, we're introduced. I liked your ride."

"I'm obliged. I wish I could ask the favor of a dance."

"People," said she, irrelevantly, "have said you were a man of courage."

"You don't know what sort of a dancer I am," he replied. "No, I'd better leave good enough alone."

"This is none of my business, Mr. Chaffee, but I overheard your friends say that you had some trouble with your ranch. I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry. Really."

"I kind of hated to lose that place. It's right by a creek and there's cottonwoods around it. I built a log house right where

I could see the peaks. Sort of hate to lose it. A man gets his heart set on something. But—" and he raised his arms Indian fashion, "I've always been able to earn wages."

"You're not going to try it again?" she asked, almost severe.

"Next spring, higher on the bench." He switched the subject. "Ma'm, is it just a visit you're makin'?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "I am going back."

He looked down, marking the beauty of her dark hair and the rose color of her cheeks. He had never seen a woman with so clear and expressive a face; nor one so intelligent. "I'm sorry," said he. "My luck runs bad in bunches."

She saw that her partner was moving restlessly, so she started away. A rare smile came to her eyes. "I am going back. But I've decided not to go right away. I'll be in town for a week. Or else on Mr. Woolfridge's ranch."

"Well," he began, and didn't know just exactly how to finish.

"Well," said she, mimicking the sound. Then she was down the hall, dress flashing in the mellow light. And at the turn she looked back and smiled again, a brilliant figure in the crowd. Jim Chaffee went toward the Gold room, dissatisfied. "I didn't say at all what I wanted to say. What's the matter with me?"

DAD SATTERLEE was deep in a game and at the moment hoisting a bet made by the glum and pallid gambler who had the previous night played so heavily. The strain seemed to be bothering his nerves, for his long, slender fingers drummed the table. But Dad Satterlee was as stolid as a rock, his red and homely face puckered over the cards. He called and lost the bet to the gambler and relaxed, appearing amused. Woolfridge shouldered through the crowd and bent over Satterlee, whispering.

"No—No," Dad answered aloud, "I told you I ain't going to be bothered any more with that nonsense. I ain't got a price to set. Never did have one, never will. Cut it out, son."

Woolfridge reared back and went rapidly from the room. Jim Chaffee turned to watch Woolfridge; at that instant there was a smashing report at the table. He jerked about and saw Dad Satterlee's whole countenance suffused with anger. One big fist covered the cards. He pawed through them, lifted one and another to the light and set his eyes close against the backs. The pallid gambler was half out of his chair. Satterlee took the whole deck and threw it full in the man's face. And he knocked everything aside in the bull-like uprisal.

"I thought you was crooked! The last five decks you produced are all marked the same! Yo're a dam' tinhorn gambler, mister!"

"I resent that!" cried the pallid one.

"Resent?" roared Satterlee. "Listen. This is a white man's country. Gentlemen play poker hereabouts, not card sharps! Get out of this place, get out of my sight. I've been watchin' yore style plenty long and I've plumb paid for the privilege o' exposin' you. You be out of this country by tomorrow mornin' or I'll personally see you run out!"

"I resent that!" repeated the man. "I will not allow any man—"

"Get out!"

The gambler looked about him and found no comfort. The crowd, without inspecting the cards, instantly took Satterlee's word, for Satterlee was a blunt and certain man. So the gambler, as white as death and quite shaken, disappeared into the bar. Satterlee growled like an angry bear. "Who invited that sharper to play in this hotel?" Then he saw Jim Chaffee. "I'm goin' home, Jim. You ready to ride?"

"Yeah."

"Meet you here in ten minutes," muttered Satterlee. He cruised through the lobby and to the street. Jim idly followed. Where had the gambler gone? On the porch of the hotel he pondered a moment, shaking his head. Suddenly he sprang to life, running toward the stable where Satterlee had gone for his horse.

"I'm a blamed idiot for leavin' him—"

A shot roared out of the stable's mouth; a shot and a solitary cry. Jim Chaffee raced onward. Men poured into the stable before him. A lantern bobbed through the air. And before he got to the place he heard a single, gruff sentence. It checked him like the impact of a gun, and stabbed him with a sensation of physical sickness.

"Satterlee. He's dead."

(This powerful serial is continued in the next WEST. Don't miss it.)

RUNNIN' WILD

by GLENN A. CONNOR

Author of "The Stray-Man," "The Deputy From Lightning Creek," etc.

Runnin' wild horses was the only life for Tommy Karol. But he swore he'd quit and go home.—He did, and the first thing he met at home was a bunch of wild horses!

TOMMY KAROL, disdained to ride the railroads, holding faith with his cayuses. Both rider and mount were travel worn and dust stained. Just a little matter of a thousand mile trek—and Tommy's faith was justified.

A happy-go-lucky fellow was Karol; grinning, cheerful, witty—formerly. But of late he had been given to morose spells and bitter brooding. There was something tragic in these intermittent spells, as though something had occurred to degrade him. At these times his lips moved in silent avowal, his face finally settling into gray lines that made him look years older than he was. There was agony in the stiff erectness of his body, humiliation in the fixed hardness of his eyes.

But as Karol neared the end of his long journey these moods became shorter and fewer. For Karol was going *home* and his thoughts were taken up in a more pleasurable contemplation. With the day at hand that would see him at his jour-

ney's end Karol threw his worries and sorrows to the winds. Snatches of rollicking range songs broke from his lips.

One such song ended abruptly as he topped a high divide. First it was the drumming of hoofs that beat upon his ears, with the same effect a bugle's blast has upon an old soldier! Then he caught sight of a wild bunch of horses in flight!

The effect was immediate and marked. Karol acted as one in whose face had been flung a challenge. He reined up sharply, tensely alert, eyes fired with a glow hard to define.

"Here they come—*an' there they go!*" Tommy enthused. "Boy, howdy! ain't they splittin' the breeze?"

Manes and tails whipped straight back in their swift flight. The herd ran compactly, led by a magnificent black that pulled Karol's eyes along with him like a magnet. The black evidently scented him. He did not break pace to look around but sheered sharply, as though instinctively aware of the danger. The herd followed, laying closer to earth in a renewed burst of speed. Karol whistled softly in admiration of the leader.

Tommy watched their retreat with flaming eyes. Only one who has known the thrill of a wild bunch on the stampede could know the temptation he was suffering. Pursuit! The sting of wind in his face—the earth slipping by with dizzy speed—the feel of straining muscles! Who can describe such a sensation that defies explanation? The blood tingles with it. Queer thoughts creep into the mind, incoherent—not thoughts of chances taken but thoughts that pace with the gait, wild as the chase and akin to it.

Karol was held in the grip of it, carried beyond himself. He bent forward, body swaying slightly, legs gripping his mount tensely—pursuing in thought if not reality. Rambler quivered. His ears twitched, alert. One prick of the spurs would have started him like a flash.

But no such signal was forthcoming. The bunch disappeared over an elevation. Karol straightened himself in the saddle with a sharp drawn breath, and batted his eyes as though just awakened from a hypnotic spell. He cursed softly. Then a short laugh broke from his lips, half guilty, half irritable.

"An' me claimin' to have swore off—"

Again Tommy was interrupted as he espied a speck mounting a knob several miles distant. Karol's eyes needed to be keen and far-sighted to have spotted it at all. A second and third speck joined the first. The three paused in a group at the apex of the knob.

"Riders!" And, like a flash of inspiration, "Wild hosses!"

IT WAS like pronouncing a sentence upon himself minus any understanding of the grip a profession had gotten upon him. Five years he had followed the game, a wild horse hunter, down in the mountainous and desert country of Arizona. Then an accident had occurred that had caused Karol's embitterment. He had declared eloquently there was nothing in the game but calamity, and he vowed he would never chase another horse.

But Tommy was like a man addicted to strong drink. His partner in the business, who had been running wild horses more years than he could remember, had taunted him that he couldn't quit. The chaffing Bowers had subjected him to only increased Karol's determination and stubbornness even while at times it scared him that his partner might be right. It was then Tommy took a sudden hankering to return to his old home range in Wyoming, forgetting that there were wild horses there and that he might have to suffer the same temptations.

"Wild horses!" Tommy rolled the words over in his mouth like some craved morsel. The dust of the chase was in his nostrils, for "smells are surer than sound or sight to make the heart-strings crack." Karol was lost but he did not realize it.

With a sudden yell Karol put his horse down the treacherous slope at a reckless pace. The cause was another rider sweeping down the valley on the trail of the disappeared herd, where a light film of dust still lingering in the air to mark their exit. The man rode like he himself was pursued, his mount stretched out at his best speed. He drew opposite Karol and words of query and retort were whipped back and forth.

"Wild 'uns?" asked Karol.

"Yep!" came the answer.

That was all except the sharp regard of a pair of gleaming black eyes set in a face pinched and wrinkled and of leather hue, as the pursuer flashed past. Karol lost ground rapidly.

"What the hell's wrong with you,

boy?" Tommy spoke to his horse.

Then he came to his senses. With a feeling oath he pulled up his hard blowing mount. "Well, of all the damn fools—here I'm a-buttin' in an' you loaded to the guards with pack-traps—"

His words ended in a sort of gurgle. His face went red, then white. He didn't have anything more to say just then, but the way his jaw suddenly set was significant of his comprehension.

He maintained a leisurely gait from then on, the man who had "swore off" silently berating his weakness one minute and gloomily pondering the marvel of it the next.

"The devil take yuh, Bill Bowers," Karol spoke aloud, "why'd yuh say I couldn't quit for? Haven't I got a souvenir of its curse?" He laughed a short, hard, mirthless laugh in which there was a note of self-pity. "I reckon one warnin's enough—yeah, a-plenty! *I tell yuh I've quit.*"

But even Karol wasn't convinced.

IT WAS the middle of the afternoon when Tommy rode into sight of a cluster of unpaintd, weather-warped buildings that made up the town of Clearwater. He immediately forgot his brooding. His eyes sparkled and blinked suspiciously. Home! Home again after five years! The unchanged familiarity caused a mist to form before his eyes that he tried to wipe away but it still persisted. A lump of emotion arose in his throat, for there were times when the old scenes had seemed very distant and remote.

"Back—back where I come from—" Karol's voice was husky, choked, sorrow and joy struggling for mastery. There was humiliation in his joy, a keen regret as old memories came vividly to mind. For a ghost came to confront him. Those old saddle-pals of his, always trying to out-do each other in dare-deviltry, some would still be about, and how could he stand on equal footing with them now? At riding?

He thought he might still have the edge on them. There was nothing wrong with his nerve, one thing his accident had not fazed. But there were other stunts—Karol recalled one of his mad escapades, swimming the Clearwater when it was up and raging, on a wager. Some such stunt as that again and how would he keep his friends from knowing his defect?

Karol shivered. They would never say anything, but they could not help what their faces expressed. Horror at first—then pity. He could stand scorn better than that!

Karol's eyes were pulled toward the stockyards, memories of which linger in the heart of every cowboy. For here ended the season's hard work and trials, invariably celebrated by some exciting doings. His eyes widened as he noted the figures lining the running-boards of the pens. A cloud of dust hung about them, stirred up by many trampling and stamping hoofs from within. With a sudden rush of excitement Karol put spurs to his horse.

Necks twisted about curiously at this new and precipitant arrival. Karol saw both strange and familiar faces, but no hint of recognition was bestowed upon him. Small wonder. The hot Arizona sun had transformed Karol's features to the hue of an Indian's. The wild life had changed him still more. Hardships had drawn him.

However, recognition of his character and calling were instantaneous. They greeted him with that rough heartiness waddies greet waddies the West over.

"You a cowboy?" inquired old Dan Wilcox innocently.

Karol looked quickly away and grinned. Shrewd old Dan had not recognized him. And Karol had punched his first cows for old Dan, at an age when most boys were still playing in a nursery. His regard turned back to the figure-lined fence, taking in the rough, worn attire of the range. Every man was sun-browned and weather-bitten, limp hatted and with jeans saddle-slick. Karol looked at old Dan again, whimsically, a taunting grin on his lips.

"If you fence-warmers is an example—no, I ain't guilty."

Old Dan gave him a sharper look, puzzled for a moment, then a look of joyful recognition crossed his face. "Well, I'll be damned—" He broke off abruptly and flashed a look, quick and inquiring up and down the figure-lined fence. Only casual interest was depicted upon the other faces. Old Dan's grin became dogmatic—so far he had been the only one to recognize Karol and his quicker penetration pleased him immensely. Old Dan would have his joke—he wanted to see how long he could keep them in ignorance.

Winking slyly at Karol, he drawled, "Well, now, it must be important business that brings yuh here—was you lookin' for some one?"

The others were curious, too, but from a different reason. It was evident to them that horse and rider had just come off a long trail. The significance of it piqued their interest.

"I'm lookin' for an ol' cow-dog by name of Dan—" Karol began.

"Say, ain't I seen you b'fore?" another voice spoke up.

KAROL'S attention swung about quickly, recognition flashing into them the instant they lit upon the speaker. "I reckon we've met," he chuckled. "Out on the range this mornin'. Yuh passed me like a freight train does a hobo. Man, you was splittin' the breeze! Did you—" Karol turned sudden incredulous eyes inside the pen. "By God, you *did* get 'em!" he ejaculated softly. When he turned back there was a new respect in his eyes. They stared silently at each other, the lights in their eyes changing as though both were recognizing kindred spirits.

The man Karol looked upon was shrivelled and dried. Karol understood, and his face sobered unconsciously. The bowed legs. And that bent, broken form —how well Karol understood!

He looked again at the milling herd and nodded thoughtfully, "Yep, you was bound to get 'em."

"I always get what I go after," the little man retorted sharply, something of a challenge in the gaze he bent on the home-comer.

"But you ain't never got the blue outlaw yet," murmured Dan Wilcox drily. "How long yuh been chasin' him, Crook?"

The man called Crook threw him a glance that smouldered. "Ne'er mind, I'll get him—I'll get him now, Dan." He made a vehement gesture toward the horse bunch.

Every eye fastened upon the magnificent black leader, magnificent in a terrible way. In his fire there was the threat of death—in the blood-flecked eyes, the stamping ebony hoofs, and the quivering muscles under his sleek, black hide. Men eyed him silently, grim-faced. Old Dan shook his head in violent disapproval.

"Don't yuh ever, Crook—that black devil'll kill yuh sure as hell!" he said.

"I've rode worser ones'n him," the little man stated a fact.

"You danged little wind-burner," Dan turned on him impatiently. "Maybe yuh have, maybe yuh ain't. But yuh're gettin' old enough to get all such foolish ideas out of yore head. You can't clamp onto 'em like yuh usta could. Yuh're gettin' old—don't yuh figger that? As for me, I say that hoss *can't* be rode! There's blood an' murder in that feller's eye! Why, I bet there ain't a young sprout here got the guts to even tackle 'im!"

"He's bad—that's the reason I wanted him," muttered Crook, more to himself but audible to the others. "If I c'n break him to the saddle he's just onery 'an tough enough to run that blue stallion down! I *gotta* ride 'im. He might kill me but—I gotta try it. It's my only chance! If there was any one—but there ain't!"

He turned and addressed Wilcox ferociously, "I offered a thousand dollars for that blue hoss—I put up the money to prove I meant it. But nobody brought him in! I had riders out for this feller" —he indicated the black—"but they didn't even get *him*. That's the way it goes. What I want I gotta round it up myself!" He turned to the only one he felt understood.

"Did yuh ever want a hoss so bad it hurt—here?" He pounded his left breast.

Karol nodded his head in jerky fashion, an odd, strained expression upon his lean features. As though he divined its meaning a quick light of hope sprang to the old cripple's eyes. "That black'll do it," he muttered softly, persuasively. "A thousand—fifteen hundred—the price is no item."

"Crook, yuh damned ol' fool!" snarled old Dan, leaping down off the fence and confronting the two. "You ain't a-goin' to drag this boy in! Tommy, don't yuh listen to the ol' tarantuler!"

Karol straightened with a jerk and stared frightened at his old employer.

"Dan!" he gasped. "I almost fell! I swore I'd quit—"

"Sure yuh've quit, boy. Yore maw tol' me—"

"Don't say it, Dan," pleaded Karol. "I want to forget—that is, I don't want the boys to know so they'd call me what I was called down there in Arizona. I just—just don't want to be reminded of it that often."

"I savvy." Dan caught his hand and squeezed it hard. But what he had in mind was not what Karol referred to at all. Wilcox was thinking of the black horse, Karol of how close he had come to promising Crook to take the blue outlaw's trail.

CROOK watched them puzzled and not a little disappointed. It was not guess-work on his part, he recognized the ear-marks. If the blue outlaw could be captured this man could do it. Tenacity of purpose and contempt of risks was written in every line of his bronzed features. His eyes were an audacious, intrepid blue that sparkled defiance at death. He knew all the effects of their calling, and Karol carried their indelible marks.

Karol saw the shadow that swept the old wild horse hunter's face and responded impulsively, "I'll help yuh out what I can, ol' timer. I'll contract to break that black for yuh. But yore blue hoss—I reckon you'll have to find somebody else or run 'im yoreself, 'cause yuh see I've quit that business."

Karol quietly swung down and started stripping his traps and saddle off his horse. "Will some of you boys loan me a hand? Cut that black out an' throw his bunch in another pen."

Several jumped down with alacrity. Wilcox stared at Karol, incapable for the moment of speech. And after he did regain his vocal powers he came to the conclusion it was useless to protest. He remembered Karol's unalterable attitude when he once decided a course. So all he could do was curse softly under his breath.

Crook was like some transformed being. His bent body straightened perceptibly and there was a new fire in his eyes. He didn't say anything—he did not even express any gratitude. But his new manner spoke volumes.

The boys who had volunteered to help Karol did so with considerable circumspection. They kept within close proximity of the fence when it was convenient to scramble to safety did the black leader attempt to charge them. Thus they hazed the bunch about the pen while trying to maneuver them away from the leader, one man stationed at the gate ready to slam it shut the instant the bunch emerged. But it was always the leader who made the first break for it, and finally he was allowed to escape into the lane and shifted to another pen.

As Karol scrambled over the fence with his rope the spectators also shifted their stations. Some of the helpers had taken seats back on the fence, having sampled all the black's disposition they cared to, and not nearly so enthusiastic to offer their assistance. Those remaining on the ground were hugging the fence and appeared as reluctant as the others to proceed any farther.

The man who had been at the gate sat nursing his skinned features, resulting as the black horse had lunged out the opening and lashing out at the gate in passing. It had all happened so quickly and unexpectedly that the gate tender had been unable to dodge the gate as it slammed back.

But Karol never hesitated. He dropped down into the pen dragging his loop. "One man's enough in here—you hombres get back on the fence," he told those waiting to help him. "If I need any help to bust him some of yuh can jump down an' grab the rope with me."

They didn't require a second invitation. There was a moment of inaction as Karol stood on one side of the pen, the black leader on the other, measuring each other with a steadfast regard. The black stamped and snorted. Karol shoop out his loop flat and took a step forward. With a shrill squeal the black charged.

Karol jumped to one side in the nick of time, at the same instant flipping his loop over. It was pretty work and a neat "bust." Karol did not look to see if he had filled but braced himself for the shock. There was a slight burst of applause as some leaped down and ran to Karol's assistance. But he needed no help so far as busting the black was concerned. The horse was already down, struggling to regain his feet while Karol had just a long enough hold on his rope to escape the lashing hoofs.

Karol released the rope into other hands, leaped upon the fighting black's head, and called for his hackamore. But all this was old work and men waited almost without breathing for the final test which none doubted would end tragically. The black was proving a fiend. They admitted Karol's adeptness that could only come from an extended and varied experience, but still hung in doubt as to the outcome.

IT REQUIRED only a minute to fasten on the hackamore. In another the black was again standing, blindfolded, one hind foot tied up. Karol's saddle was lifted over the fence to him. The black was no longer struggling now. It was as though he was waiting for the moment when he would be on more equal terms. Not so much as a quiver touched his muscles as Karol lifted and gently lowered his saddle onto the black's back. He touched the muscles tensed hard as iron and his lips tightened grimly. But in Karol's blue eyes was the light of battle, a gleam that glories in a hard struggle. He slipped the latigo through the cinch ring that was passed under to him and pulled it up gradually and gently until the black's knees commenced to show signs of buckling.

Karol then bent down and reset his spurs, tightening them a notch. He did the same to his chaps that were scuffed and worn thin from the contact with much brush. As he picked up his reins he looked at the two earing the black down, one on either side, a whimsical grin upon his lips.

"You boys got yore route picked out?"

The two exchanged glances, a bit uncertain, and looked back over their shoulders. "You an' yore cayuse ain't goin' to have nothin' on me, the jump I'm goin' to make for my side the fence," said one with a forced grin.

"Get up an' let us get to hell outa here!" muttered the other.

Karol lifted his toe to the stirrup. "All right then, scramble, boys!"

He was in the saddle like a flash. There was no preliminary shifting to get a securer seat. He had spoken as he swung up. The two took him at his word and made a wild dive for the fence, even forgetting to jerk the blindfold in their haste. Karol pulled it himself, then slapped it down over the black's head.

Hardy riders as they were, they gasped at his audacity. And results were immediate, violent, and demonstrated irrefutably the nature of the horse. With a snort his head went down and his back up. He exploded in a crazy, weavy sort of buck-jump that would have unseated most riders with its first contact. But Karol remained glued to his saddle, the more marvelous the way he was raking the black with his spurs, leaving furrows of hairless hide from shoulders to hips.

Then it was the spectators, rather than Karol, that were threatened by disaster. Failing to unseat his rider by his most fiendish endeavors, driven to mad fury by the irritating raking of spurs, the black hurled himself against the fence, a living catapult of twelve hundred pounds of solid bone and muscle. The planks shook and crashed and sent splinters hurtling for fifty feet. Those in the act of jumping were sent hurtling and rolling in the dust. But fortunately the planks were of sufficient toughness to send the black rebounding back inside.

And those farther away were filled with wonder. The black had struck the fence broadside. They expected to see Karol reel out of the saddle with a crushed and maimed leg. But nothing of the kind happened. Karol was still riding —scratching—yelling like one possessed.

The black stopped suddenly, head raised, and looked at the assemblage on the fence out of bloodshot eyes. He was trembling violently, foam dripped off his black hide and ran down his legs in a white lather. Crook, sitting beside old Dan Wilcox whose face was a sort of yellow, let his hand fall on the old cowman's arm in a tense grip.

"He's conquered—that boy's conquered the devil! Not beat—not broken, Dan. His spirit's still all there! God, what a hoss!"

Old Dan was realizing the same thing. His mouth had dropped open. What dumbfounded the others was not so much a mystery to him—only that Karol had so easily conquered the black.

"God, what a rider!" he gasped.

Karol swung down, dropped his reins, and strode over to where old Dan and Crook sat. He passed within a foot of the horse's head, carelessly, heedless. The black could have whirled and kicked him, reared and struck him or even bitten him. But he did none of these things. He backed away a step with a snort, and looked after Karol, a curious expression in his eyes.

Those tumbled off the fence came limping up, more badly shaken than Karol appeared to be. Karol grinned at them aggravatingly. But it was wiped off in a hurry when one of the limping men inquired wonderingly:

"Say, what's yore leg made of—wood? By God, that hoss put yuh into that fence hard enough to tear yore leg off—I seen

it 'fore I was sent helter-skelter—an' yuh don't even limp!"

Karol's face went white. He turned quickly away only to meet the satirical glance of Wilcox. But that glimpse of Karol's agony caused his manner to quickly change. Before he could open his lips to speak, though, another spoke up who abruptly changed the subject.

"Say, fellahs, yuh know I never seen but one bird that could ride like that b'fore—yuh know what I mean—one of them sort of 'Don't give a damn' sort of riders! That was Tommy Karol."

"Tommy Karol?" from old Dan. "Why you darn fools, this *is* Tommy Karol!"

Amazement, incredulity, then growing recognition greeted this statement. Boys who had ridden circle, done their trick at night-guard, and had palled around with him, grew red with embarrassment that they had failed to recognize him sooner. Karol accepted the change of topic with relief and endeavored to keep it changed. He quickly put them at ease, wringing their hands joyfully even while he chaffed them.

Crook took no part in this demonstration, keeping back, a knowing, satisfied grin playing about his lips.

THE days dragged into a week. A strange unrest had taken possession of Karol. That and something more. His former friends tried to make his home-coming all that it should be, showed a willingness to take him back on the same old footing. But Karol, in his apprehension they learn his defect, shunned their society. His friends had come to notice it and gave it the wrong interpretation, thinking he had become swelled-up over his superior abilities. It is not in a cowboy's nature to impose and they in turn commenced to draw away from Karol.

Karol, not stopping to reason that it was himself at fault, was cut the deeper at these actions. Cursed with a too sensitive nature and a strict sense of perfection in his own make-up, he exaggerated the effect of his accident. That it made him different from the others, or from his former self, was the fault of a too strong imagination.

It was something of a shock to him to learn that "Crook" was a nickname for the little old wild horse hunter, derived from his bent and broken body. That, too, had resulted from accidents in his wild pursuits, where a man is always staking his life when he undertakes to run down a wild bunch. That Crook didn't seem to mind this constant reminder of his deformity did not help Karol to any great degree. The name was more natural to him, his defects outward and so apparent.

"I reckon he just ain't sensitive," was Karol's conclusion.

But Karol—his defect was not visible. None would ever suspect even in his walk. It had been an expert artificer that had modeled his substitute, attached with an ingenious harness that would never allow it to come off until Karol took it off.

But another experience like that on the first day of his arrival and how could he keep them from knowing? They were still discussing the miracle of it.

Pegleg!

That was the name he had come to be known by down in Arizona—the name he had run away to escape.

Tommy felt it more acutely when he was alone, especially alone in the hills. For some reason the sight of the broken country lying west of Clearwater awoke varying emotions in him, a vague loneliness and a keen sense of remorse. In his mind he hated it for it reminded him too acutely of the country where his accident had occurred. There were slopes like the treacherous slope on which his horse had fallen. They had been traveling at break-neck speed. Sharp, jagged rocks had protruded everywhere. When Bill Bowers had picked him up it was with the splintered bone of his ankle driven completely through the skin. It had been necessary to amputate Karol's leg midway between ankle and knee.

All this he realized as he stared out across the broken country from some high knob. Each morning early he would set off on the black and ride into the hills. Each morning it was the same savage fight. Old Dan took Tommy's word for it when he said he must keep at the black outlaw if he was ever to gentle him sufficient for Crook to use in pursuit of the blue stallion. But even after Tommy's demonstration on that first day that he first rode him, old Dan persisted in his claim that the black was treacherous and could never be broken to trust. He worried and stewed when Tommy persisted in riding him out alone and pre-

dicted gloomily that some day both would fail to return. To which Tommy just smiled queerly.

But not once did old Dan suspect that Karol rode out early to avoid meeting his friends, although shrewd old Dan commented to himself that Tommy acted damn queer since his return. Tommy was too often given to moody spells, and Dan missed his old lightheartedness which now only flashed forth at times.

Tommy, after a hard run, would halt the heaving black atop some high knob, and sit there motionless, staring moodily down upon the varying shades of the roughs, until the black again showed signs of uneasiness. Something was going to happen, something Tommy longed for, something gripping yet so indefinable he could not explain it only that he was waiting impatiently for it to come to pass. At such moments he held back an almost irresistible desire to signal with his spurs that which would have sent this superb leader of a wild bunch running mad over the hills.

THEN it came! Tommy greeted it with a gasp and a strangled exclamation. It hit him hard because its identity was entirely unexpected. But on the instant he recognized it without a thought of what had gone before.

He had listened to tales of the blue stallion, enthusiastic descriptions, stories of hair-raising experiences. He had listened with a cynical expression upon his face. But there it was his mind that registered. It had struck a responsive chord in his heart. It had thrilled. Deep in his heart he knew the horse must be unusual to so affect a man of Crook's calibre. But he had not allowed himself to think about it.

Now all things like vows, determination, and good intentions were forgotten. Tommy reverted to type in a flash, again the pursuer of wild horses. Ultimatums and dejection disappeared in the blink of an eye. Eyes shining, face glowing, hands tightened upon his reins convulsively, he sat like a statue staring. Not even his heart had given him a hint of anything like this!

Silhouetted against the skyline atop a pinnacle of rock, motionless as a graven image, one hoof poised in midair, head held high, ears shot forward, black mane and tail flowing in the sharp breeze of his high altitude—Tommy viewed the blue stallion. It was more like a blue flame posed as he was so that the rays of the ascending sun flashed upon his hide, slick and glossy, seeming to radiate blue flames that sparked and flared.

"The blue outlaw!"

Karol whispered the name reverently. All that he had heard was verified, and more. He had run too many horses to be fooled. He had seen many wild horses, wonderfully fleet, wonderfully colored, wonderfully developed—but never a one to compare to this!

He contemplated every magnificent line. He marveled at the fearlessness, the assurance and confident bearing of the reputed wild stallion. Less than a quarter of a mile separated them.

Then he understood. A gulf stood between them! Cliffs that only wings could surmount. And the blue horse knew it! He stood there curious, perfectly aware of his impregnable position. Tommy even wondered how long the blue horse had been observing him thus? And he marveled that the black had not seen—

Karol tore his eyes away from the sight to observe his mount. The black was standing stiff and straight, his ears shot forward, an audible whistle issuing from his nostrils. Then he understood how his own attention had been first attracted. It was the black who had first sighted him!

A challenging whistle came from across the gorge—clear, distinct, and significant. The black answered and lunged forward, out of control in the instant. Karol, too, surrendered in the same flash to the inevitable, and bent forward in his saddle with a wild, piercing yell. Both had answered the challenge of the blue stallion. For Tommy it meant he would never quit the trail until the blue horse was captured or disaster stopped him.

MIGHTY muscles quivering and jerking between his knees, sent a thrill the length of Karol's body. Intoxication of the chase was his again. As the black horse tore down the steep slope obliquely, paralleling the gorge, Karol commenced to strip himself and his mount of every ounce of surplus weight. He knew instinctively that all the pursuits he had experienced heretofore would never compare with this one. He stripped his saddle clean of all but his rope. Leather jerkin and gun and belt were cast off without a thought

of loss. He formed no plans, for plans were useless. He had no say whatever in the matter, for his mount was running wild and out of control. It was a race between the black horse and the blue, both wild stallions, both herd leaders, both range kings; a test of speed and endurance—for true as fate the black was in pursuit of the blue stallion of his own accord!

One quick glance back showed Karol the blue stallion had disappeared. He laughed, an exulting, taunting sort of laugh. He shook his fist in the direction of the deserted pinnacle and gloated wildly.

"I'll get yuh, you blue flame, if I have to run yuh plumb to hell!"

The sullen thunder of rapids far below suddenly burst upon his ears. Tommy looked down startled to find himself traveling at a dizzy speed right along its brink. The pace was too fast for him to make out a possible descent into the gorge although he well knew that was what the black was looking for. The wind whipping him in the face sent tears streaming from his eyes.

The black was running wild and still out of control. That challenging whistle was the only spark required to set off his dynamite nature. A misstep and both would be flung into oblivion.

But Tommy was no less bereft of his own senses. He made no effort to control the wild pace. Those dizzy depths slipping past under him that would have made a brave man faint, did not faze him.

But suddenly his knees gripped with a sudden convulsive movement. Karol disdained to ever resort to his saddle horn. His left hand clutched the reins tighter, his right held aloft like a rider's in a contest. But from his lips escaped an involuntary gasp.

The black had suddenly changed his course straight over the face of the wall. Karol had the sickening sensation of descending through space. Then followed a severe wrenching of his body as the black twisted this way and that, his hoofs striking fire from the rocks where they came in contact. Then Karol realized they were not falling but that his mount was finding some indistinguishable way down the wall, their descent little less dizzy than had been their former pace. The river seemed to be leaping up to meet them—there was a great clattering of rolling stones in their rear—then he got another shock as a deluge of water descended upon him, ice cold, drenching him to the skin.

Out of the swift current plowed the black to the opposite side and turned sharply up the river on a deeply worn trail. Karol was confounded.

"By God, boy, you know this country!" he cried.

Again the black hit a stiff pace, keeping to the trail that followed the course of the river. Then just when Karol commenced to doubt the black's motive after all, his mount took another short turn to the left where the gorge they were following forked.

Much brush, a congestion of boulders, and sharp turns obstructed Karol's view. But he saw that the trail also turned in this direction and that it pointed in a general way toward the pinnacle where they had sighted the blue stallion.

Without warning the black suddenly stopped, head erect, ears perked forward. For a long moment he stood thus, seeming to Karol to scarcely breathe. Then he heard, too, the clatter of hoofs upon rocks.

Karol could not help noticing the black, standing stiffly immobile, unquivering muscles flexed hard as steel, as though waiting—waiting for what?

Karol's mind functioned swiftly, reviewing the canyon they had come up. His lips parted in a slow smile. He cursed softly under his breath. A thought had come to him, a way—depending on the disposition of his horse. He touched his reins tentatively. To his surprise and great satisfaction his mount responded instantly. Almost without urging the horse started to retrace his way back down the trail.

KAROL could have shouted with joy but he strangled the impulse. The black horse was again under his control, amenable to his will. Tommy rubbed his neck and spoke soft, meaningless words that the horse seemed to understand as his ears flipped back and forth and he trod as though walking on eggs.

Where the two canyons converged Tommy reined him off the trail and toward the opposite wall where it made a sharp turn up-river. They took a station out of sight back of this wall where it turned. Then commenced a wait, horse

and rider both at tension as though one realized as fully as the other all that depended upon his coup.

Tommy was trusting to his ears to tell him the proper moment which would spell success or failure. For he had been struck by a plan that was little short of an inspiration. Could they succeed in turning the bunch down-river his chance with the blue horse was more even. The gorge through which the river had cut its course extended beyond the breaks to within a mile or so of Clearwater where it ended abruptly in a smoother rolling expanse of country. In such a country the black could give the blue horse the run of his life!

To Karol's knowledge of the gorge there was no way out of it unless it was where they had descended, and he doubted even the ability of the blue stallion to scale it. But the success of his plan depended entirely on striking at the right instant, to give the bunch a scare that would stampede them *down* the river. If he acted too quickly and they took back up the conyon they were coming down, or if he waited a fraction too long and his sudden appearance sent them up river, then all was lost.

Karol gripped his reins so hard the knuckles showed white, muscles tensed and features strained as he concentrated on listening. The rattle of rocks and click of hoofs continued—drew nearer—Karol's eyes burned expectantly.

Then the head and shoulders of a blue horse commenced to show. In full view he stopped and looked up at the opposite cliff. His herd, scattered along behind, continued drawing into sight until all were in a compact bunch behind him. Karol waited, motionless as a statue, his heart in his throat, not daring to breathe, his mount no less statue-like. The bunch could not have stopped in a worse place.

Then as if satisfied with his observations the blue leader again started forward, his bunch following close behind. He reached the angle of the trail and Karol suddenly jumped the black into sight with a wild yell.

One startled glance the blue stallion took back—and shot *down* the canyon, his herd clattering at his heels. The black shot after them, leaping and dodging boulders and crashing through brush. Karol let him go, anxious to crowd them past that one danger spot.

And there his heart again rose in his throat. Opposite his descent the blue leader plunged into the swift current and out the opposite side. He took the first short slope in long leaps. A groan was wrenched from Karol's lips.

But the blue horse, for all his desperation, hadn't the temerity. A third of the distance up he stopped, regarded the wall that confronted him yet—and came plunging back down.

Karol's curse of bitter disappointment ended in a delighted yell. "Hell, Black Boy, he ain't the nerve—you got him faded!"

On down the canyon they went, the blue leader making just such vain and futile attempts so often that Karol was kept in a constant stew of fear and relief. But the former wore off and Tommy commenced gloating. First up one side, then across the river and attempting the other, the scrambling was fast playing the blue leader out. Karol made no more attempts to stop him, conserving his own horse's strength, remaining just far enough in the rear to prevent the blue stallion from breaking back.

ABOUT the time Karol was due back old Dan took his daily stroll over to the stockyards. For an hour he sat atop the fence whittling, casting anxious glances now and then toward the hills. At the end of the hour when there was still no sign of Karol returning, his manner grew downright worried.

"Somethin's happened—I knowed it would!"

It was unfortunate for Crook that he wandered over to the stockyards at this time. Old Dan opened on him with all his pent-up resentment, deluging him with hard words that would have been fighting talk under different circumstances. But the old wild horse hunter seemed to understand what was back of it and heard him out silently. When Wilcox finally paused from lack of words to express himself farther, Crook squinted up at him with a whimsical expression.

"I don't know if it's me that's the damn fool or you, Dan," he said softly. "I reckon I understand this matter better. You say I'm responsible for Karol actin' queer? You're wrong. Don't yuh reckon I savvy? Tommy's got a peg-leg, ain't he?" Crook snickered at his start. "Hell, I knowed it right after that black crashed into the fence with him! I know

more'n you, Dan—I know more'n Karol hisself. He thinks he's duckin' his friends on that account. But he's dead wrong. When a man's troubled he imagines a heap of things. But that ain't his trouble."

Crook's eyes twinkled upon the confounded Dan. "Look at me, Dan. I'm all busted an' broken—you-all call me Crook! Do I mind? Not a bit! Runnin' wild hosses done this to me—an' I'm proud of my marks! So you don't savvy what ails Karol?" he continued softly once more. "Why, man, his whole trouble is the thought that he's quit the wild horse game—an' he ain't quit a-tall! No, he ain't quit." Crook turned toward the hills. "I been watchin'—waitin'. Each day I been seein' him come in. But he's overdue this mornin'—Tom'll be comin' back this time with that blue hoss for me."

Wilcox looked at him startled, in incredulity, then dawning comprehension. "By God, Crook, I'll bet yuh're right!"

"You'd bet on a sure thing, Dan. C'mon, let's go eat so's we'll be on hand when he shows up."

Old Dan and Crook were not the only ones on hand for the expected arrival. Backing his hunch Crook had passed the word about that those who wanted to be surprised to their boot soles to be at the stockyards that afternoon. It was just such an assemblage as was gathered on the afternoon of Karol's homecoming.

Men squatted upon the ground in the shade of the pens or sat atop the fence, discussing and conjecturing upon the enigma. Neither Wilcox or Crook had given them a hint of what was doing.

BY THE middle of the afternoon, and still nothing had come to pass, the group commenced to grow restless and impatient. One had just opened his mouth to ask Crook when his show was going to start when a sharp ejaculation escaped his lips instead. He waved a hand toward the river that called the others' attention to a fast traveling cloud of dust.

"Some one runnin' a bunch an' they're sure fannin' the breeze!"

Crook was on his feet in a flash, his stoicism disappearing at the same time. A wild, startling yell burst from his lips.

"It's him! Dan, Tom's a-comin'!"

Still the others failed to comprehend until a horse broke out of the dust-cloud and outstripped the main herd. "My God, it's the blue outlaw!"

Eyes popped and mouths dropped open. Amazement held them speechless. The blue horse had quit the bunch and was heading straight back over the hills toward the rough country. But just when it seemed he was due to escape a black horse became visible out of the dust-cloud, seeming to fairly skim over the ground. In great leaps he overtook the blue horse, drew nose to nose with him, shoulder to shoulder, forcing him around and back.

"Look at that blue devil run!" gasped Crook.

"Look at that black run!" roared Wilcox. "Man, he took right up on that blue like he was standin' still!"

But Crook had only eyes for his prize, seeing the beauty and perfection of him for all his coat was lathered and dust-caked. A croak of exultation came from his throat as he saw Tommy had succeeded in turning him and haze him back toward the bunch that had stopped. With heartbreaking adversity the whole bunch scattered and started back in the direction of the river. Again Karol succeeded in turning them only to have to pursue the blue leader in another direction. But always the bewildered herd paused until their leader returned.

Men watched and waited in an agony of suspense as Karol fought the herd foot by foot toward the stockyards. Someone suggested they get their horse and ride out to help, but Crook savagely intervened. "You leave him be—he'll get 'em! By God, I want you fellers to see what a real rider is!"

Suddenly he turned on them again with a sharp command, "Duck—get out of sight—he's got 'em comin' his way!"

It was true. The blue leader had given up and had taken refuge in the middle of his herd. Karol was bringing them up slowly, carefully, letting them advance of their own volition but closing every other way to them. The spectators took concealment on the far side of the yards next to the track, watching between the cracks the nerve wracking progress.

But at last Karol had them up between the wings. Here another threat was made to break back, hard fought for a moment with the result constantly in doubt. But the black was like a cat on his feet, appeared to be all places at once. Men forgot the blue horse, all except Crook, in

watching the black. Awe, wonder, and admiration struggled simultaneously for expression. Wilcox of them all was the most impressed. The horse he swore could never be broken—this marvel! It was incredible! And Tommy—he was just a part of the black, terrible beast he bestrode.

Then as if growing tired of their continued backwardness, or possibly seeing his chance to foil his enemy, the black suddenly lunged forward, right into the middle of the herd—straight at the blue stallion. He came at him teeth gnashing, forefeet lashing the air, an ominous sight. The herd scattered helter-skelter. The suddenness of the attack was too much for the blue horse—he whirled to escape. Too late he saw the trap he had entered. The gate slammed shut behind him as he circled the pen looking for a way to escape.

Karol dragged himself from the saddle and dropped wearily to the ground. The next minute he and his horse were surrounded by men too overcome by what they had witnessed to do more than stare at the two. Wilcox alone seemed capable of observation. His first impression was the great change in Karol. There was nothing gloomy or morose about him—he appeared on fire with life! There was the old joyful expression of his eyes. His face was flushed with the spirit and humor that were his by nature.

Crook stepped forward and confronted him. "Well, Pegleg, you sure got 'im!"

Wilcox choked, then controlled himself. Karol's face was a mixture of emotions. It paled, grew red, then sort of blank. He first glared at the speaker, then flashed a quick, accusing look at old Dan. Wilcox shook his head in quick denial.

Then Karol looked back at Crook. The expression upon the little old wild horse hunter's face caused his hurt and indignation to suddenly disappear. Affection, respect, and something more was there. Karol saw his words in a different light—a compliment, a title of honor. He suddenly grinned.

"I sure did, Crook—an' now I'm claimin' my reward."

"Why, sure—" Crook started delving in his pockets but Karol halted him.

"No money, it's something else I want. Crook, I'll swap deals with yuh for this black."

"Why, son, yuh're plumb welcome. I was aimin' to give him to yuh—"

"Then I got all the best of the deal!" Karol exclaimed softly, thrillingly. "Ol' timer, your prize can't hold a candle 'longside of mine. Maybe you got beauty but I got style!"

Loaded with Dynamite

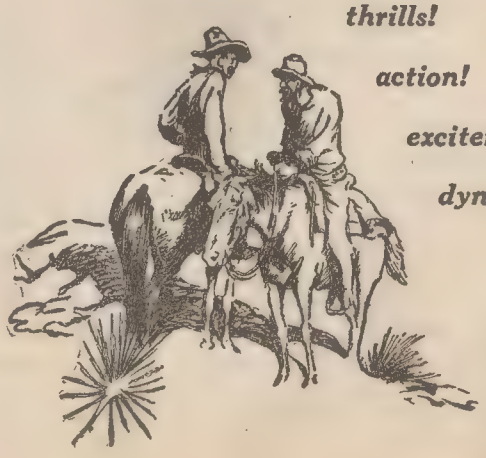
by **Richard A. Martinsen**

thrills!

action!

excitement!

dynamite!



next issue

also

A Snaky Rope

by **George Cory Franklin**

a story you can't miss!

REAL MONEY

by

Carl Elmo Freeman

Author of "Plums," "The Jangle In the Jury," etc.

When them famous Hatchet brand rannies, Pot and Bolt, gits their hands on a mess o' this here new undersized money, they think they got tradin' stamps, an' throw 'em away.

IN THE cow country, if a deep well watering a large acreage of range breaks down, the windmiller for that outfit works all hours, days, nights and Sundays, straight through and until he has that pump outfit throwing water on top of the ground. Then, when the thirsty cattle are assured of water, everybody considers that the windmiller is entitled to take a nap.

And Bolt Jones, the windmiller for the Hatchet outfit, had just finished a sixty-hour stretch of windmill pump repair work and was catching up on his sleep. He lay stretched out on his blankets in the bunkhouse emitting breathing noises like those of a whistle buoy that has caught cold in the fog.

Pot Owens, the cook, came to the door in the partition between the bunkhouse and the kitchen and gazed down upon the sleeping man.

"I oughta roll 'im over on his side," soliloquized Pot, "'fore he snores the top of his head loose!"

Pot tiptoed across the buckled linoleum, stepped over a hole so his heels wouldn't click on the exposed floor boards and stood by the bed. Then he slipped one hand under a bony shoulder, the other under an angular hip and started to roll Bolt to his side.

"Get over!" growled Bolt in his sleep, and jabbed the bed with his elbow.

Pot grinned and waited a moment. Then, when Bolt emitted an extra loud snore, Pot tried it again.

"Lay over!" growled Bolt, as Pot gave him the shove to his side. "D'yuh want all the bed?" Bolt struck back with his long arm.

Pot tried to dodge, but Bolt's half-closed hand struck him across the bridge of his nose. Pot staggered back, caught his heel in the hole of the cracked linoleum and fell with a loud thump that shook the whole house.

"Why damn yore onery hide!" Pot gasped, blinking tears from his eyes. "I oughta git me a club an' beatcha to death!"

Bolt came to, rolled up on his elbow and gazed sleepily at the fat cook sitting on the floor.

"What's the rumpus?" he wanted to know.

Pot wiped blood from his nose. "Go to hell!" he gritted. The sight of blood on his pudgy finger seemed to further enrage him. "I oughta git me a axe an' chop you loose from both ends!"

"Who?" asked Bolt.

"You!" snapped Pot.

"Me?" Bolt gasped. "What have I done?"

"Pawed me in the face like a locoed burro!" Pot snarled. "That's what you done—you greasy-faced, bat-eared buzfard!"

"Say, you big doodle-bug, you musta been buzzin' round my head an' I mistook you fer a bot fly," growled the puzzled Bolt. "Why can'tcha let a feller sleep?"

"Nex' time I'll letcha snore your durn fool head off!"

"Snore!" Bolt snorted. "Me snore? You ain't got no holler comin'; when you git on your back you sound like a fat boy with a hair lip tryin' to play a slip-horn!"

"Hello, in there!" came a voice from the outside.

"Who's 'at?" exclaimed Pot. Wiping the blood from his nose he scrambled to his feet.

BOLT swung to a sitting position on the side of the bed and grabbed for his overalls.

"Hey, in there, ain't there nobody home?"

Pot waddled over and peeped through the dusty screen door.

"Who is it?" asked Bolt.

"It's the sheriff an' two strange fellers," whispered Pot. Then he pushed the screen open. "Hello, Stone," he called, "git out."

"Ain't got time," said Stone Davis. "Where's everybody?"

"Scattered round at the different camps," said Pot. "If it'd ever rain, they'd come in an' we'd start the wagon out. But it's so durn dry—"

"Ain't there nobody here?"

"Yeah, me'n Bolt's hayre."

Bolt was standing by the bed poking a vagrant shirt tail in his overalls.

"Listen to that durn fool!" he growled. "Gittin' me stuck on the jury."

"You two'll do," the sheriff was saying. "Get Bolt, an' you fellers grab your horses an' fog it up through Water Canyon and head off them train robbers when they drop down into—"

"Train robbers!" gasped Pot.

"Yes, their car broke down over here in the roughs an' they took to the hills afoot. You two fellers—"

"Which train robbers?" broke in Bolt, standing barefoot behind Pot with a boot dangling from each hand.

"A bunch held up the train this morning," explained the sheriff, impatiently. "We trailed them over here where their car broke down and they took to the hills afoot. I want you men to grab a coupla horses and fog it up Water Canyon an' over the hill and hold them up when they come out through Kraut Gulch."

"You mean us?" asked Bolt, over Pot's shoulder. "Me an' Pot?"

"Yes. We can't get around there with the car," said the sheriff. "We'll leave it down here, take their trail, and push them on through. They'll have to go down Kraut Gulch an' you two can hold 'em up till we can—"

"Have they got guns?" Bolt wanted to know.

"Yes, they are armed—"

"How many of 'em?" cut in Bolt.

"Four," said the sheriff. "They're carryin' the swag and we've got to keep on their tail while the trail's fresh so if they hide it we'll find it. You men hurry—"

"No," interrupted Pot. "I ain't lost no train robbers. Bolt hayre might go—he'd paw 'em in the face if they come an' woke 'im up."

"No, by golly," said Bolt. "I ain't had no breakfast yet, an' I feel sorter weak to my stummick—"

"Cut it out, men!" the sheriff snapped. "This ain't no time for horse play. If you think I'll stand for any monkey business you got a think comin'. As sheriff I call on you to help me round up that gang. Do you get that?"

"Wal," said Pot, "if you put it that way. But I don't see why you pick on us."

"That's what I say," grunted Bolt, having trouble getting a sockless foot in his boot. "An' my hawse's back's sore from pullin' that heavy pump pipe from the saddle horn."

"There's nobody else," said Stone, secretly elated as he knew if he got these two he wouldn't need any more. "If there was, I wouldn't be bothered with you two yeller backs." He surreptitiously winked at the man in the back seat.

"Wha-zat?" flared Pot. "Why, dadburn your onery pictur', Stone Davis, if you didn't have on that star I'd yank you out hayre on the ground an' make you wish you had! You jus' fetch on your durn train robbers, me'n Bolt'll make 'em climb a tree."

"That sounds better," said Stone, dryly. "You two jump in the wind. They're makin' for Saddle Gap and will go down Kraut Gulch. But you can beat 'em round there by an hour if you hurry. You're my deputies, so don't hesitate to shoot—if you have to." The sheriff stepped on the starter.

"Deputies!" exclaimed Pot, brightening.

"Yes," said the sheriff, as the motor caught. "You're deputy sheriffs," and the car started.

"Wait! wait!" Pot lumbered to the car. "Don't we get badges?"

"Ain't got none with me," said Stone as the car moved off.

POT stood disappointed. Bolt was stamping his left boot on the door step.

"W'at in 'ell do you want with a badge?" he growled.

"To show them fellers we mean business," said Pot. "It's kinda dangerous to jump out of the brush an' stick up somebody nowadays, they think you're tryin' to hijack 'em."

"That's right," nodded Bolt, "an' we might—at that." He stalked toward the corrals. "You fix us some grub," he called back, "while I rustle the hawses."

Bolt had to pass up Baldy, his favorite saddle horse, because of a sore back. And instead, he caught a chalk-eye sorrel that was tough and, though gentle to handle, would pitch a little every time he was mounted. For Pot, he caught a blocky bay that could carry weight.

When he led the saddle horses up to the door of the cookhouse, Pot came out carrying a flour sack with the contents divided in both ends.

"You go drink some coffee," said Pot, "while I tie this here on—"

"Coffee!" snorted Bolt. "Ain'tcha got nothin' but coffee?"

"There's some biscuits on the table."

The screen door slammed behind Bolt. Pot tied the flour sack behind his saddle, went into his bedroom off the kitchen and came out with a cartridge belt about his middle and carrying an old .45-70 box magazine rifle which he tied under his left stirrup leather.

"Well, come on!" he yelled. "Fetch your guns an' let's go!"

There was no sound of Bolt coming. Pot stuck his head in the door.

"Ain'tcha comin'?"

"Eh?" grunted Bolt. "What's the rush?" he growled, stuffing biscuits in his pockets. "Thought you hadn't lost no train robbers!"

"We promised Stone we'd do it, an' if we don't he'll stick us for breach of promise an' not let us be deputies no more. Whar' your gun?"

"Ain't you got none?" asked Bolt. "I might need mine."

"Well, durn it, git it!" snapped Pot.

"I got it," said Bolt. "Le's go, 'fore you git in a hurry."

Pot discovered the whang lacing in his left stirrup leather was loose and began re-threading it through the holes.

"Wait'll I git this tightened up," he said.

"That's the way you are," grumbled Bolt. "Fust it's 'Hurry up, hurry up,' an' then it's 'Wait a minute.' Now you got me in the notion, I'm r'arin' to poke my gun at some train robbers an' make 'em behave."

Pot frowned at Bolt a minute. Then, with malice aforethought, "Better file the front sight off 'fore we start," he growled.

"File the—" gasped Bolt, grabbing the bait, line and sinker. "What the Sam Hill 'u'd we file the front sight off fur?"

"So it won't skin your gullet," chirped Pot, when one of them bad fellers takes your gun away from yuh an' rams it down your throat!"

"Huh!" snorted Bolt, swinging into the saddle, and Chalk-eye proceeded to put on a show.

CHALK-EYE was eight years old, and he had been broken when he was four. He was a good cow-pony, but he liked to pitch a little when first mounted to notify the rider that he must use both stirrups and not hang all his weight in one.

Bolt was a little peeved at Pot getting that old gag off on him, and was not tending to his knitting when he swung up. Chalk-eye slapped the saddle up against the seat of his overalls so hard that Bolt grabbed the horn to get his balance.

"Look out!" yelled Pot. "You'll pull that horn out by the roots!"

Chalk-eye felt Bolt was off center and gave a couple of extra jumps.

"Sick 'im, Chalky, sick 'im!" yelled Pot. "Pop his head off!"

Bolt's pockets were shedding biscuits.

Because he had hold of the horn and was hunting for the right stirrup with his foot the jerks hurt Bolt's neck. But he rode him. That is, he hung and rattled till he got Chalk-eye's head up.

Pot had mounted, and trotted up along side. He leaned over and gazed owlishly at Bolt's saddle horn.

"Um-m," he grunted. "You choked that pore little horn till it's black in the face."

Now Bolt was already peeved, and besides, his neck hurt him. So Pot's bright remark did not contribute materially to his peace of mind.

"Go to hell!" he snarled.

"He-he, ho-ho," gurgled Pot.

"That's right," snapped Bolt, "crow!"

"I ain't crowin'," said Pot. "I'm cacklin'. Ol' Chalky come durn near layin' a egg!" He gurgled some more.

"Keep on an' I'll make yuh cluck!" Bolt threatened.

"You're the one to cluck," Pot came right back, " 'cause you're shore settin' 'im.'

Bolt took down with the sulks and wouldn't talk. As they rode up Water Canyon, Pot tried to get a rise out of him, but Bolt was grouchy.

They made the twelve miles around to Kraut Gulch in an hour and twenty minutes. There they picked a low wooded knoll commanding the mouth of the canyon on which to make their stand. They rode behind the knoll to leave their horses with the reins down so they could graze a little. Bolt was still sulky.

Pot dismounted rather stiffly. His pants legs had worked up in a wrinkled wad under his knees, and he shook them down.

"This durn hoss's 'bout as easy gaited as a three-legged camel," he growled, tenderly caressing an area that felt as though it was rubbed raw.

"Too bad," said Bolt, brightening. Then, when he saw Pot pulling his overalls away from a fat ham, Bolt actually grinned. "I hope the blisters bust an' we have to soak your pants loose from yuh!"

Pot couldn't think of anything worse than that to wish on Bolt and was somewhat depressed till he discovered the flour sack containing their lunch had lost off his saddle. Then, he tried to think up some way to lay the loss on Bolt.

"That's what I git for hurryin' after your pitchin' hoss," he said, "so'st I could grab your head when it snapped off."

BOLT thought that was a poor comback to his blister talk and grinned.

"I was lookin' for your head to come loose any minute," went on Pot, working up to the climax. "I didn't want it to fall in the rocks an' git all bunged up—an' I had to let the grub go."

"Eh?" exclaimed Bolt, his grin vanishing. "Wha-zat? Grub?"

"Yeah," nodded Pot, cheerfully. "I seen it fall, but I was watchin' your head bob about, an' I thought every minute your chin would fly off—"

"You lost the grub?"

"Uh-huh," said Pot, now highly elated. "I heard the bottle of coffee bust, an'—an'—" he had a sudden inspiration. By multiplying the few bacon sandwiches he had had in the sack, he got twelve doughnuts, one cherry pie and some fried chicken to carry.

"Cherry pie!" gasped Bolt. "An' fried—"

"Uh-huh," Pot nodded eagerly. "The pie splattered all over a ant hill," he added to make it strong.

"Well, you durn, wuthless ol' pot-bellied gopher!" Bolt sputtered, and all but choked down. "I knowed there wasn't no use fetchin' you along. If I'd a had any sense I'd left you home!"

"Fetch me!" snapped Pot, taking his long rifle from the saddle. "Stone tole me to fetch you! You heard 'im. I'm the head deputy of this hayre posse, an'—"

"Head—hell!" snorted Bolt. "You couldn't head nothin'! You better head back an' git that grub 'fore I rub your head in the dirt!"

"You an' who else?" Pot wanted to know, and he patted the heavy rifle suggestively.

Bolt eyed the gun. "You better file that front sight off 'fore you wish you had!" he gritted.

There was a rattle of brush and rocks, and with the involuntary movement of the average man, Pot threw the gun to his shoulder.

From behind the knoll a deer ran out, a spotted fawn followed her, bouncing along on pipe-stem legs.

Bolt knew Pot wouldn't fire, but he seized the opportunity to rawhide the fat cook.

"Don't shoot!" he snapped, and knocked the rifle up. "You're a hell of a deputy—try to kill a deer outa season!"

"I wasn't goin' to shoot!" defended

Pot, lowering the hammer.

"An' a doe at that!"

"I tell yuh I wasn't going to shoot when I seen—"

"Hell you wasn't!" argued Bolt. "You wanted to kill her so her fawn would starve to death—that was it. Not satisfied with starvin' me, you wanted to starve that pore little innercent—"

"Wonder what scared 'er," broke in Pot. "Somethin'—or she wouldn't a brung her calf along."

AND something had scared her. When they slipped crouching through the cedars, up over the knoll to where they could see down on the other side, there, beside a spring at the mouth of the gulch were four men. They were arguing and a big man was holding a blue striped canvas sack behind him as though to keep two of the others from snatching it.

As Pot and Bolt crouched behind a brushy cedar, Pot's knee struck the stock of his rifle, the barrel came back and the high front sight struck him on the chin. Pot cursed under his breath.

Bolt saw what had happened and, "I tole yuh, you oughta file that front sight off," he whispered.

Pot made a hissing noise, like that made by a mad cat and poked the barrel through the foliage toward the men.

The four men were now squatting about the contents of the canvas bag that the tall man had lumped out on the grass.

"Money!" gasped Bolt. "They're goin' to divide it."

"Uh-huh," grunted Pot. "That's the swag Stone said they was liable to hide." Pot raised his gun. "Maybe we'd better not let 'em divide it, or they'll scatter—"

"Let 'em divide it," broke in Bolt. "Maybe one of 'em'll hide his share an' we can watch where he puts it—"

"Why not let 'em hide it all," suggested Pot, "an' then we'll tell Stone they got through 'fore we come."

"He'd say we was lyin' an' was scared to stick 'em up," said Bolt, watching the men. "He didn't want to deputize us to start—"

"Hell!" exclaimed Pot, almost aloud. "I forgot we air officers—but we ain't got no badges to show we're doin' our duty." Then, he nestled the stock against his shoulder, puckered his left eye, held his breath, and raised his head.

"Duty or no duty," he growled, eying Bolt out of the corner of his eye. "I shore hate to shoot a feller when he ain't lookin'. I'll git a bead on that big guy an' you holler, maybe he'll turn round."

Pot settled his cheek against the stock with the elaboration of a target expert. Bolt grinned. He knew Pot couldn't shoot into that bunch without first giving them a chance to surrender.

Pot held his stance a moment, then lowered his gun. "Whyn't you holler?" he whispered. "Durn it, I can't hold it on 'im a week!"

"You're a durn ol' fraud," said Bolt. "Let's wait an' see what they do."

"Well," said Pot, "Stone didn't say to kill 'em, he jus' said to keep 'em from goin' through till he could git hayre. They ain't tryin' to go no place."

"Listen."

They could hear the voices of the men, now raised in anger.

"They're fussin' 'bout somethin'," said Pot.

One of the four seemed to be a mere boy, and he was arguing with the big man over the division of the loot.

"We were to divide, share and share alike," came his clear young voice.

"Like hell!" came the snarling tones of the big man. "I was to get half because it was my job—I doped it out. You three got the other half to divide equal."

"That wasn't the way you talked—"

"Let it go, Bob," cut in the man wearing a gray cap. "It's customary for the leader to get half."

"Yes, but—"

"Looky yunder!" said Pot. And there in plain view was Chalk-eye, moving out on the flat with his head held out to one side to keep from stepping on the dragging bridle reins. And, as they looked, Pot's bay horse came into view.

"Hell!" ejaculated Bolt. "We're goin' to have to do somethin'."

BUT the four men had not seen the horses. They were intent on the argument.

"That isn't all," came the boy's voice. "You said there'd be no killing, and you shot that mail man on the train—I saw you."

"He asked for it, didn't he?"

"He had his hands up, and—"

"He was reachin' for the rope—watcha goin' to do, blab?"

"You said there would be no—"

The big man's hand snapped out. He shot, and the boy fell forward on his face.

"The dirty skunk!" breathed Pot. "I had a hunch I oughta plug him when I had a chance."

Bolt was cursing under his breath, and moving his six-shooter up and down as though he itched to use it as a club and brain the killer.

The man with the gray cap had stepped over the boy. He now raised up and said something.

"Do you want it, too?" the killer snarled, while the third man stood crouched, waiting.

Gray Cap turned his left side to the killer. His right hand flashed across his front and, *Wham!* the third man shot Gray Cap in the back.

Gray Cap's knees buckled, his gun hand came out, jerked, and he shot into the ground as he pitched across the boy. The big killer stood over the fallen man and deliberately fired two shots into his quivering body.

The third man who had made the cowardly shot looked furtively about. He saw the horses, and again dropped into a crouch. A gun in each hand pointed toward the bushes behind the animals which were watching the two men with interest.

"Horses!" the man all but screamed.

The big man whirled, threw up his gun to fire, then saw the saddles were empty.

"We gotta do it!" gritted Pot. "We gotta do it. Git ready to holler, an' when he looks up hayre I'll blow 'im in two!"

"Don't shoot to kill," cautioned Bolt. "Bust his leg—"

"Shore I'll kill 'im," said Pot. "Go on an' holler, an' I'll splatter 'im all over the flat—you kin kill the other one."

"No," argued Bolt. "Let's save 'em to hang!"

"Hang?"

"Yeah, I wanta see 'em hung—the back-shootin' coyotes."

"That would be better'n killin' 'em dead," acknowledged Pot, as he relaxed.

The two men had stood tense for a moment, and were hurriedly grabbing the bundles of money from the ground and stuffing them in their pockets and inside their shirts.

"Now's our chance," said Bolt. "Let's jump out an' cut down on 'em."

"Wait—wait! They're making for the hosses," said Pot as the men came running.

The horses were a little back and down to the left of Pot and Bolt. And, as the two men ran crouching toward them, each had a gun ready expecting the owners of the horses to appear any moment. They were intent on the bushes along the edge of the flat.

POT and Bolt waited till they were within a hundred feet.

"Now!" said Pot.

They both jumped from behind the bushes into plain view.

"Stick 'em up!" yelled Bolt.

The men stopped and looked up to see Pot with his rifle leveled and Bolt aiming his big six-shooter with both hands.

"Up with 'em!" yelled Pot. "We air a posse of deputies an' we'll blow yuh to pieces!"

The big murderer's eyes flashed to the thick cedars on either side of Pot and Bolt, then he dropped his gun and his hands went up.

The other man wilted. "Don't shoot—don't shoot!" he screamed, as he threw down his automatic and clawed the air.

"Then stand still!" growled Bolt.

"I'll stand still—I'll stand still," whimpered the cringing coward.

As Pot and Bolt moved down close, Pot said, "You get their guns an' I'll keep 'em covered. Then git your saddle rope an' tie 'em up."

Bolt kept his big six-shooter in his right hand, and with his left he took a gun from the waistband of the big man's trousers and tossed it up on the sidehill. He felt a lump in a hip pocket, but it was a wad of bills.

Then Bolt stepped to the smaller man, found an empty shoulder holster under his left arm, saw the automatic on the ground and stooped to pick it up.

With the desperation of a cornered rat, the man kicked Bolt's six-shooter from his hand and grappled.

"Hayre!" yelled Pot, and swung the rifle on the fighting men, but dared not shoot for fear of hitting Bolt.

The other bandit, the big killer, saw his chance, lurched himself upon Pot and they went down together, smashing the stock of the gun.

The horses snorted, and dragging the reins, they moved on up closer to the spring.

Bolt's right hand numbed from the

kick handicapped him. He would no sooner get his man rolled under, than he in turn would be rolled under. Then he saw that the man was trying to brain him with a gun. Instantly he recalled having seen him crouched with two guns.

Bolt jerked his head to one side, avoided the blow. He seized the coat sleeve with his numbed right hand, and feeling it slipping, he sank his teeth in the man's wrist. The automatic exploded as the man gasped in agony and smashed his left into Bolt's face. Bolt felt the wrist being twisted from between his teeth, gave a lurch, and rolled on top again. He grabbed the heavy automatic and brought it down twice.

THE man lay still. Bolt drew back to strike again, heard somebody run by him, and saw it was the big killer running toward the horses, now near the spring. Pot was trying to get up, but fell back, evidently knocked out. Bolt threw down on the running man and pulled the trigger. There was no report, and he tried to throw in a cartridge.

Then he saw that the slide of the automatic was jammed with dirt and grass roots. He threw the thing down, lurched to his feet and ran after the man.

The horses were both gentle and, as a rule, easy to catch with the reins down. But they were suspicious of the big stranger, and when he ran up to grab the reins of Pot's horse, the bay threw his head to one side and turned tail.

The man did not see Bolt coming and turned to come up on the horse from the other side. Then he heard the hollow thumps of Bolt's sockless boots as he ran. But he was too late. Bolt was on him before he could whirl away.

He swung at Bolt's head, but Bolt ducked under and rammed him with his shoulder. They stumbled to their knees.

Pot had again got to his hands and feet, but his head swam when he attempted to stand up. He saw the two men crash together.

"Stay with 'im, Bolt," he called, "I'm comin'." But his voice sounded as though he had his head in a barrel, and he was afraid Bolt would not hear.

And Bolt didn't hear. He had wrenched his right shoulder when he struck and his whole right arm felt numb. But he was using it better than he suspected. They had scrambled to their feet, and Bolt had swung at the man's head. The man had ducked, but Bolt's bony wrist had crashed against the taut tendon under his ear and he was dazed.

The man fell into a clinch, but Bolt did not know he was waiting for his head to clear. He thought the man was trying to sink his teeth into his already painful shoulder. Bolt snapped up a knee and broke the clinch.

The man staggered back, Bolt followed trying to get in a knockout, but he stepped among some rocks, his sockless foot slipped in his boot and his ankle turned.

The man jumped in, clinched, and they slid down. Bolt was on the bottom. The man's head was clearing. He grabbed a rock and drew back groggily to bring it down on Bolt's head.

Bolt realized his danger and threw up his left hand to ward off the blow.

Pot had gained his feet only to fall again and was now hippering along half running, half crawling. He was within forty feet of the fighting men when he saw the man raise the rock to strike Bolt and felt that sickening sensation of helplessness to prevent it.

"Wham!" came a shot. The man slumped sideways to the ground and the rock rolled from his nerveless hand. Pot whirled in time to see the man in the gray cap lower a smoking gun and settle back across the dead boy.

Bolt scrambled from under the limp legs and glared toward Gray Cap.

"The durn pizen little varmint!" he snarled. "I was savin' that dam bum to hang!"

Then he saw Pot trying to stand erect.

"What's the matter, Pot, you shot?"

"No," mumbled Pot. "I got a swimmin' in my head—sounds like I'm in a jug when I talk."

"You're bleedin'!"

"Little," said Pot, feeling tenderly in his hair. "That big louse busted the stock off my gun an' then hit me with the barrel!"

"Let me see," and Bolt began parting the hair.

"'Tain't nothin'," Pot said, pushing him away.

"Hole still, durn it! I ain't goin' to hurtcha." Bolt parted the hair and found a half-inch gash. "Mus' be where that front sight snagged yuh. Does it hurt?"

"Ough!" snarled Pot, giving Bolt a shove.

POT was mad. He could hardly stand the ignominy of being gashed with his own gun sight under the circumstances. He knew Bolt would add insult to injury by talking about it the next six weeks, and crow and cackle and cluck. Pot got madder, and this did more to clear the fog from his mind than could have been accomplished any other way.

"You durn, long-legged, gimlet-headed cinch-bug!" he gritted.

"Why, what the—" gasped Bolt, in surprise. "Did I hurtcha?"

Then, came the churning of hoofs, and there was Chalk-eye pitching across the flat with a man on his back.

"Looky yunder!" Bolt exclaimed, and suddenly recognized the man as the one he had left stunned at the foot of the hill.

Bolt pawed in his shirt for his six-shooter, then remembered where it had fallen when kicked from his hand, and started on a run for it.

But his action proved to be unnecessary. Chalk-eye was putting pep in his performance and was getting his man. He had him loose in the saddle and now proceeded to pitch him over his head.

The man struck, crumpled down and lay still. Bolt rushed up to jump on him before he could regain his feet, and saw something was wrong. He started to straighten him out, and Pot waddled up.

"Oughta tie him up 'fore he comes to," Bolt remarked.

"Don't need to waste rope," said Pot. "He fell with his head under 'im an' bruk his neck."

The man's shirt was open, and inside Bolt saw bundles of bills.

Gosh!" he exclaimed, and pulled out a package. "Look at the money!"

Pot looked, took a bundle and examined it. "That ain't money," he said. "It's too small."

"Eh?" said Bolt. "It is sorter little—an' too new. But it says, 'Ten Dollars,' on these, an' 'Federal Reserve Bank' on the paper band."

"That's what mine says," Pot nodded. "Only mine's five's an' they got Lincoln's pictur' on 'em."

"These's got some guy named Hamilton," said Bolt. "Must be them clearin' house certificates them banks use."

"That's what they are," agreed Pot. "I read 'bout where they had to use 'em for money one time when we couldn't sell a cow for ten dollars of anybody's money."

"Maybe it's counterfeit," said Bolt. "An' hayre these fellers has footed it through them roughs an' killed one another over it. I'm shore glad it ain't real money," he added. "I'd hate to have to go through the agony of bein' honest an' withstan' the temptation to hide a armful 'fore Stone gets here."

"Me an' you both!" breathed Pot. "I wouldn't stop with no armful, I'd take it all—not leave 'em enough for seed!" Pot looked at the bundles showing inside the shirt. "Is it all like this—ain't there no real money a-tall?"

"Eh?" And as the thought struck Bolt he pawed the bundles out to see.

"All alike," he growled disappointedly, and began putting it back.

"It feels like money, only it's too new," said Pot. "Wonder if a feller couldn't pass some of it off on these Mexicans. Antone Trujillo's got a pacin' hoss I'd like to swap 'im out of, an' he can't see good—"

"Put it back!" said Bolt. "Hayre's the sheriff an' them two fellers!"

Pot dropped his bundle like it was hot and Bolt had to shove it back inside the dead man's shirt.

POT rose to his feet, as though he didn't know anybody was within a hundred miles and assumed an air that he hoped was that of an officer with great responsibilities bowing his shoulders.

Then, as though suddenly aware of the sheriff's presence, "Hello, Stone," he called in a sad voice. "We held 'em up for yuh."

"I see you did," said Stone, dryly. "One get away?"

"No," said Pot. "Hayre's one, an' over yanner's one, an' them two make four."

"My gosh!" exclaimed one of the strange men. "Killed them all!"

"Naw—naw," denied Pot. "We didn't kill nobody."

"They must have put up a fight," said Stone, to the man. "I told 'em to shoot if they had to."

"Fight!" said Bolt, coming over. "I'd tell the world! That big guy killed the kid there, an' that bird in the gray cap took it up, an' that skunk shot 'im in the back, an' then that big louse stepped over an' shot two more in 'im to make shore he was dead!"

"Then when Bolt was subduein' that big bum," said Pot, "he riz up an' plugged the big guy right when Bolt was a savin' 'im to hang!"

"Yeah," nodded Bolt, eagerly. "That was it. Then that yaller skunk fell off a hawse an' broke his neck."

"U-um," grunted the sheriff, scratching his chin.

But one of the strangers could not be shaken from his belief that these two bloody men had won the war.

"Ah," said he, skeptically, "a very ingenious yarn. I seem to recall that a gang of thugs killed themselves up in Kansas some years ago and laid it all on Wild Bill Hickock."

"Don'tcha believe us?" flared Pot.

Stone Davis, the sheriff, cut in. "This is Mister Watters, postal inspector. And this is Mister Gordon, special agent of the treasury Department. They happened to be in town."

"I don't give a durn if he is a postmaster," growled Pot. "He don't want to make us out a liar!"

"You're wounded," said the sheriff, trying to get Pot's mind on something else. "A bullet's glanced off your head."

"Naw," said Pot. "That big bum pasted me with a gun barrel."

"An' that's where the sight snagged 'im," spoke up Bolt.

Pot gave Bolt a nasty look, and Bolt tried to square himself.

"I'm sorry I didn't let you shoot 'im in the first place," Bolt added, hastily.

"Here's some of the money," called Gordon, bending over the tall man.

"That ain't real money," Bolt informed Gordon. "It's too little."

"Sure," said Gordon. "It's as good as gold. This is the new money we're putting into circulation in a few days."

"Huh!" Bolt snorted, and frowned at Pot. "An' you said they was tradin' stamps or somethin'," he growled.

I KNOWED it was money all the time," lied Pot. "But I didn't let on 'fraid you'd grab it an' run. Then I'd 'a' had to kill a feller deputy."

"Why you durn ol'—" began Bolt.

"I don't understand," spoke up Watters, from where he had assured himself that the man in the gray cap was dead. "How a dead man could shoot—"

"I don't neither," said Pot. "I didn't see it. I was too busy tryin' to save that dirty coyote to hang, an'—"

"It's Buck Eldredge, all right," called Gordon, turning the tall killer over. "Somebody will get the four thousand dollars reward for him."

"Eh?" said Pot, perking up, then relapsing into meditation and deep thought.

"He's shot full of holes," Watters was saying, indicating Gray Cap.

"I know," said Bolt. "But Pot says he jus' riz up an' plugged that big guy—jus' like that!"

Watter's face showed plainly that he did not believe it, and Bolt turned to Pot for corroboration.

"Didn't he, Pot?"

"Ah, shuck," growled Pot, stepping on Bolt's toe. "Ain't no use talkin' Bolt, this feller knows beans with the bag open—an' it can't be he'ped." Then to Watters. "All we ask is that you don't tell folks we killed all these hayre fellers. They'd think we was Billy the Kid or somebody."

"Well," said the sheriff, coming over from where he had been helping Gordon. "You men have certainly earned the reward. There'll be about five thousand dollars of it altogether—maybe six."

"Eh?" gasped Bolt.

"We'll have to tell the officials," said Watters to Pot. "but we won't broadcast the news,"

"But," began Bolt. "We—"

"We'll shore 'preciate that," said Pot hurriedly as he nudged Bolt with his elbow. "'Cause we don't want folks to think we air Wild Bill or nobody."

"You men better go down to Capitan and have your wounds dressed," advised the sheriff. "We'll take care of things here. And I want you to know, I certainly appreciate the manly way you did your duty as my deputies."

"U-um," said Pot, swelling with pride. "We done our duty as we seen it."

Then, when Chalk-eye had again gone through his daily dozen and Pot and Bolt were riding down the canyon toward Capitan, Bolt eased his arm into the front of his shirt and said, "It's a good thing I didn't know that was real money."

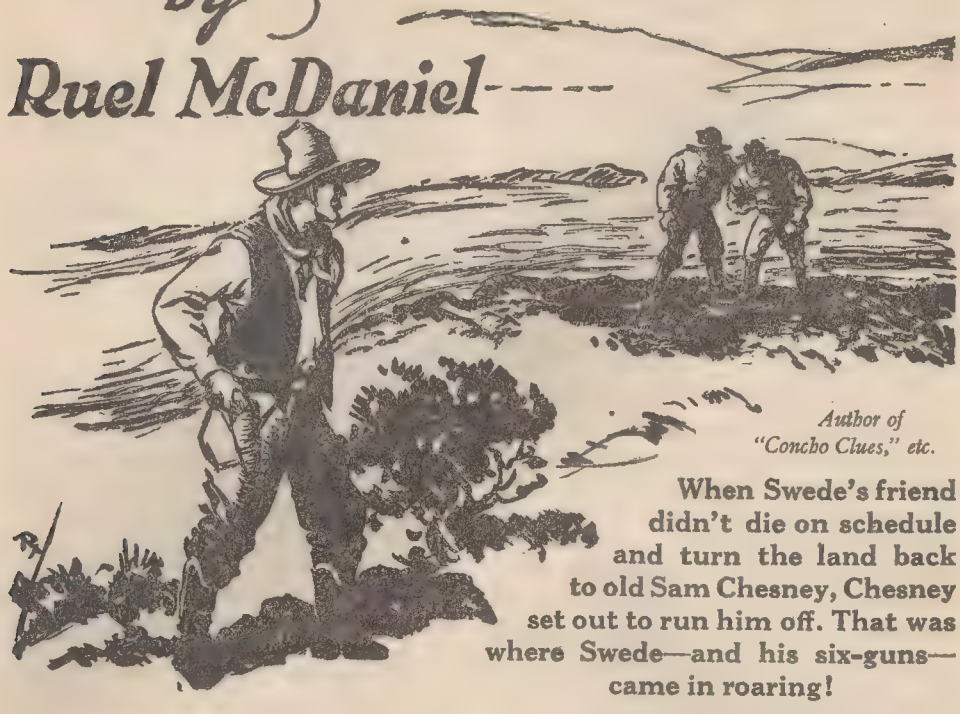
"Yeah," said Pot. "We'd been on the dodge now. As 'tis we git all that reward an' I kin buy me that pacin' hoss to ride in comfort." He eased himself forward in the saddle. "It pays to be honest, don't it?"

Bolt looked at Pot a minute. "Uh-huh," he grunted, as they rode on.

Oct. 30-29

MARKED *for* SLAUGHTER

by Ruel McDaniel



Author of "Concho Clues," etc.

When Swede's friend didn't die on schedule and turn the land back to old Sam Chesney, Chesney set out to run him off. That was where Swede—and his six-guns—came in roaring!

SWEDE JOHNSON attracted very little attention as he cantered his horse down the main street of Conejo, until he passed up the First Chance bar, the Conejo Grande and then The Lobo Negro. By that time some folks were noticing him, as both rider and mount showed signs of a long grind up the trail. They both were caked with dust and gaunt. Ordinarily, such a rider would have sought a bar for himself and a corral for his mount the first thing, but this one did neither.

He seemed earnestly bent on some sort of business. He looked it; and he looked to be prepared to attend to it.

The scarred and scratched, but highly polished stock of an old model army rifle dangled from the left side of his saddle. On each hip hung a single-action forty-five. His trail pack was neatly and securely in place. Everything about the rider and his horse was right where it belonged, and it seemed to be there for a very definite purpose.

The short-coupled horse jogged carelessly down the street, but there was that something about him to indicate that one word from his rider would galvanize him into instant and dynamic action. Swede sat his saddle naturally and leisurely, but instinct would have told an observer that he was a hard man to take by surprise. Or to take in any manner, for that matter, unless he happened to be willing to be taken.

"A danged queer outfit," observed a lounger in front of the Lobo Negro cantina to his companion. "Le's see where he turns in, and then we better report it to the Old Man. I figger he'll wanta know plenty 'bout this here hombre."

The watchers had not long to wait to see where Swede turned in. As he rode down the street he eagerly scanned the crude signs on each of the squalid adobe buildings. Evidently failing to find the one he sought, he pulled his horse to the side and drew a letter from the inside pocket of his short jacket. It was dated, Conejo, Texas, nearly a month earlier, and read as follows:

Dear Swede: Wisht you would buy out of that cavalry outfit and come up here pronto for a spell. No need to write if you can't. You know the Doc sent me up in these hills with that dinky lung right after we got back from France. Well, old Sam Chesney thought I'd die in a

few weeks, so he sold me a section of land up at the head of Box Canyon to run some sheep on. I didn't die on schedule and turn the land back, and he's set out to run me off. He says now I didn't buy any water rights, but I think I did. Anyhow he's got the men and the guns and all the water for his cattle. And my last payment of $500 is due August first. I got all my Spring clip of wool here in the sheds, but he won't buy it or let me get wagons up the canyon to haul it out. He's fenced off the road and keeps it under guard. I can't raise any money less I sell this wool, and every animal I got'll be dead soon less I get water. If you come to Conejo, go to Full Moon restaurant and ask for Dad McWhorter. He'll tell you how to get up to my place.

As ever, your buddy,

Alvin Thomas.

"Dad McWhorter at the Full Moon Restaurant," Swede mumbled to himself, "must be farther on down the street." He jogged on until the gaudy sign caught his eye, then he dismounted and went inside.

"MY NAME'S Swede Johnson," he told the patriarch behind the counter.

"That's fair enough," the old fellow replied casually.

"Are you Dad McWhorter?" Swede asked briskly.

"Dad to them that knows me, and Mister to them that don't——"

"I'm lookin' for Alvin Thomas' *ranchero,*" Swede went on quickly.

"Well, now, that's plumb diff'rent," and the crusty old fellow extended his hand. "Ride straight on west two mile to El Conejo creek, turn to no'th, an' foller the creek up to the head of Box Canyon. Yuh'll find his shack in the east prong of the canyon. 'Bout ten mile from here. Yuh a friend of his'n?"

"More'n a friend. We're buddies. I got a letter from him——"

"Yeah, I writ it right here an' mailed it——"

"You wrote it?"

"I writ it for him, yes," the old man continued. "They winged the lad in the first skirmish 'bout water, an' he rid down and had me get that letter off. Pore devil's worked like a *pelado* up thar for three year, but they got 'im marked for slaughter now, an' he'll go the way all the rest of 'em's gone that's bought that track offen Ole Sam Chesney. Alvin's sheep's in the way and he's in the way. They've had to fetch all the steers in offen the range, 'count the dry spell, an' Ole Sam needs all the water outen the creek an' all the range in the canyon. So he jes' steps in an' takes. What he wants, he takes——"

"Who is this Chesney?" asked Swede.

"Him? Shore, this is his country. This is his town. Owns the Conejo brand, an' don't give a hang whose critter it gets on. He's hard as— But lookit, here he comes!" The old man suddenly stopped talking and got busy with his counter. Three men entered the little restaurant. The leader, a gaunt, slightly stooped individual with a permanent grimace and cold, faded blue eyes, came to a stop directly in front of Swede. His two companions, in grimy jeans, remained respectfully at the rear.

"Lookin' for some one, son?" the spokesman asked Swede in a grating voice.

"I am that," Swede answered grimly.

"Uh-huh. Who might it be?"

"Who wants to know?" Swede plainly showed his resentment.

"I do. Sam Chesney; that's me. Yer know that name I reckon——"

"Never heard of it, Mr. Sam Chesney. I'm Swede Johnson—corp'rel Harry Johnson till a week ago, Troop G, Seventh United States Cavalry, former cowpoke on the Pitchfork up Panhandle way."

"Who yuh lookin' for?" Chesney demanded.

"You're dad blamed certain I'm lookin' for some one?" Swede's florid face was now flushed with irritation.

"Yuh are, ain't yuh?"

"I was. Why?"

"Who?"

"Alvin Thomas, a buddy of mine, see? Now that that's settled, I'll be goin' on up his way." But his departure was to be delayed.

At the mention of Alvin's name, the two men in the rear stepped briskly abreast of the spokesman, effectively blocking an exit. A tense silence that suggested action hovered over the little restaurant. Swede fairly bristled.

"Yuh know the trail yuh followed into town?" Chesney asked.

"I do," Swede replied evenly.

"Well, head that nag of yores right

back up that trail, and nary a thing'll happen to yuh. Is it a go?"

"It is a go, far's I'm concerned—a go to hell for you!" and Swede plunged into the trio. It was a surprise attack, as Swede intended, and as such it was an instant success. The big ex-puncher jabbed at close range like a master of the art. The terrific force and speed swept Chesney off his feet. A jab to the chin sent him spinning wildly through the door, and almost to the middle of the street.

Then a dilapidated restaurant stool descended on the Swede's head with a loud crash. It broke, but hardly staggered the enraged Swede. With the fury of an enraged bull he whirled on his assailant and rushed in.

PRESENTLY the interior of the restaurant was a total wreck. This sort of thing seemed to be the native element of the two remaining attackers. While one would engage the trooper with a swipe and a fast retreat, the other would get in effective work from the rear. This was fast wearing down the dogged Swede, when he suddenly maneuvered to bunch the pair and forced them into a corner. There they huddled, much after the fashion of a coyote pair at the kill.

As Swede advanced menacingly toward them, both reached for their guns. Swede stopped, and both hands dropped to his gun butts. Fixing the men with a steady gaze, he slowly shook his head from side to side. "Don't go for them shootin' irons," he cautioned coolly. For a moment the three men faced each other without moving a muscle. Then the terror-stricken pair called it off.

"We quit, mister," said the larger of the two. The other nodded vigorously.

Backing hurriedly out of the restaurant, Swede swung into his saddle and was soon lost in a pall of dust to the west, bent on reaching his destination at the head of the canyon before dark.

Just before reaching the ford on the little creek, he saw a dim trail turn sharply to the north. He followed it and soon entered the mile-wide mouth of a canyon. The trail carried him along the eastern wall. As he crowded his horse up the gentle slope, an imposing panorama was unfolded before him. The flat, fertile landscape across the floor of the canyon showed evidences of intensive cultivation. Great areas of luscious, green alfalfa and other feed crops were separated by high fenced corrals in which thousands and thousands of fat, shining steers milled leisurely. Along the foot of the opposite bank he could plainly see the irrigation canal that converted this valley into a veritable garden. Swede marveled at the contrast between this spot and the parched, brown range over which he had just traveled.

"Water shure does make a diff-rence," he commented. "Ever' steer in them pens'd die in three days if that water was cut off. And them fields'd turn brown in a week."

He had covered about half the distance, when the sound of men at work directly ahead came to his ears. As he approached he saw that his road was blocked with a new barbed wire fence which had just been stretched. A half dozen Mexicans were engaged in the work and three strands of the wire were already in place, stretching up over the top of the ridge on the east and clear across the canyon to the west. Swede rode up to the fence and stopped.

"Can't git any fu'ther up that trail," the foreman advised.

"That's about what I'd say, offhand," replied Swede. "How do I get up to Alvin Thomas' place?"

"Yuh don't git up there, sonny," was the prompt retort. "Them's orders."

"Whose orders?"

"Mine for one, the boss's for the other. Ain't that enough?"

"Them's plenty of orders, but I got to get on up to my buddy," Swede replied grimly. "Do you take that fence down, or do I cut it?"

"Cut it son, if you calc'late yuh can beat the Texas laws on cuttin' wire fences. Yuh know what they are, don't yuh?" Then Swede recalled that cutting a wire fence was a short cut to the free boarding school at Huntsville. Not desiring any such schooling, he backed his horse off a few steps, drew one of his guns, raised it slowly to the level of his eyes and let the hammer drop.

At the first report the top wire snapped and went whizzing through the air. Another report and the second wire followed the first. With his smoking gun still in his hand, Swede rode his horse over the remaining wire and turned to the dazed foreman.

"Any objection to my goin' on up?" he demanded.

"Not so far's I'm concerned," that individual shakily but promptly replied.

ALVIN'S little place was a picture of desolation and drabness. His burned fields sprawled off up the east prong of the canyon head, almost entirely shut in by the high cliffs of the rim. His sheep were stacked tightly against the high fence that shut in his little domain and separated it from the rest of the valley. An acrid stench arose from the scores of carcasses that were strewn on every hand. As Swede rode into this veritable valley of death, the hot lust of battle settled over him, and the flush of righteous anger flushed his bronzed face.

When he approached the crude little house, the scene was even more dreary and depressing. The little storage tank that had held the water for the house was now scorched by the sun. The bottom gaped open in wide cracks. In the tiny yard were evidences of a woman's meticulous care. Native vines and flowers, now denied water, withered in their home-made receptacles; and a half-dozen rosebushes stood like gaunt spectres without a trace of color about them or a leaf on their brambled stems.

Inside the house Alvin lay on the bed, his right arm in a crude bandage, and his boyish face drawn with worry and pain. When Swede entered, however, he sat upright and greeted him with the old familiar smile.

"Boy, howdy," he enthused, extending his hand. "Meet the wife. Honey, this is Swede."

"Gosh, it's mighty grand to see you again, Alvin; but I hate to see you tied up like this," Swede spoke excitedly, taking a seat. "Seein' you brings back to mind the good old Pitchfork days, eh?"

Thomas bolted to his left elbow, smiling broadly, forgetting the pain in his right arm. "And the old army days in gay Paree, eh?"

"An' how!——An' nobody's business!"

In the light of the little oil lamp that night, they went carefully over all documents relating to the purchase of the place, noting all the terms and conditions. The deed seemed regular in every way, except the clause setting out the water rights of each party. It read:

SAID ALVIN THOMAS HEREBY IS GRANTED THE RIGHT TO DIVERT WATER FROM CONEJO CREEK ONCE EVERY WEEK, BY MEANS OF A DIVERSION GATE WHICH HE IS TO BUILD AT HIS OWN EXPENSE.

"Did you put in this gate?" asked Swede.

"Put it in the first thing after I moved here," Alvin replied.

"Does it work?"

"It does when I can get to it to let it down in place. Then it backs the water up and raises it until I can take it off in my ditch and bring it around the brow of the hill and down to my house and fields. But Chesney's put guards on it now, and the last time I went to let it down they turned the artillery on me and winged me in the right shoulder."

"What about this contract? It says here you got the right to take water once a week. That ain't the language they're usually written in, but this one's at least plain," Swede said, reading.

"Oh, Chesney admits I got the right to have the water. He says all I got to do is come and take it. That is, I got the right to the water till August First, when my next payment comes due. Then, if I don't make it, out I go."

"Any chance of lettin' this bird Chesney buy enough of this wool in your sheds to take care of that last payment?"

"Him buy it——?"

"Why not?"

"He won't even let me haul it out for anybody else to buy. In the first place, he don't want sheep in this canyon."

"He knowed you was goin' to put sheep on this land when he sold it to you, didn't he?" Swede cut in.

"Knew I would if I lived, yes. But he thought I'd kick off in a few weeks."

"I still say he oughta buy that wool."

"You wouldn't say it if you knew Sam Chesney," Alvin muttered gloomily.

"I've met him, and I don't think I'd care to know him so much," Swede replied. "But I'm gonna see him again in the mornin' and tell him what he ought to do. Le's make out a new 'greement about that water business, and a contract to sell this wool. Then I'll ride down first thing tomorrow and parley with him."

ALVIN thought such a procedure useless, but at Swede's insistence the papers were slowly written out and made ready for signatures. But

it was not necessary to ride down to find Chesney the next morning. Hardly had the sun appeared over the canyon rim when that gentleman came riding up to the Thomas place, accompanied by four men. Swede greeted them.

"I come to warn yuh to get outen this country afore yuh start plenty trouble," Chesney said glowering.

"You want to buy some wool?" Swede asked innocently.

"Hell no, I don't want to buy no wool! I don't want anything to do with what wool grows on, nor with folks that herds 'em. If you don't want to——"

"I do," Swede interrupted.

"Do what?"

"Want to," and the big trooper paused a moment. Then, "But what I want mebbeso ain't what you got in mind. My buddy says you penned him up and wouldn't let him sell wool in the spring. Now, you ought to buy it yourself. I got the contract all written out. Want to sign it now?"

"Yuh've done nothin' but cause trouble, young feller, since you arrived," Chesney retorted menacingly, "and we——"

"What do you say 'bout this wool?" Swede persisted.

"I say go to hell!"

"No, thanks," Swede replied. "Now just one other thing. Guess you can see 'thout my tellin' you that this place has got to have water."

"That's yore trouble," Chesney retorted.

"No. It's yourn," Swede corrected. "When you sold my buddy this yere land you sold him water rights."

"That's correct. Rights—not water. I got the water, and he's got the rights. Plain ain't it?"

"Yep, that's plain all right. Course, the fair thing to do is to give him a new contract that provides water when he has to have it. We've got one written out here now, all ready for you to sign——"

"I tell yuh——" Chesney started.

"No need to tell me again," Swede replied.

"To tell yuh what, again?"

"To tell me to go to hell," said Swede. "I ain't goin' nowheres till you do the square thing by my buddy."

"Then yo're aimin' to stay here and get in a passel of trouble?" Chesney said, lashing himself into a rage. "Fust yuh ride into a peac'ble town and tear up the leadin' rest'rant——"

"That's a lie," Swede replied coolly.

"A what?" demanded Chesney viciously.

"A lie. A damn' lie! You and them two pesseltails of yours——"

"Yuh'll swaller them words!" Chesney threw a glance at his gang. A dengerous gleam stole into Swede's eyes, and both hands dropped to his guns.

"Bullyin' folks has got to be a habit with you, Mr. Chesney," he said grimly. "Bullyin' and bluffin'. I called you a liar and I meant it. Now if they's goin' to be any fireworks, you or one of that pack'll have to start 'em."

Not a muscle moved anywhere, and presently Swede continued, "Now about this water. You or some of your gunmen plugged Alvin when he tried to turn it on last time. Get this: I'm goin' over there this mornin' and turn that water into this ditch, like the contract provides. If there's any trouble, you'll have to start it. Now, beat it. Get clear offen this place *pronto!*"

Chesney was not the sort of fighter to take chances. He knew who had the drop. So with a series of muttered oaths, he wheeled his horse and led his men back across the parched field and on into his own green domain.

"How many men's guardin' that water gate, Tom?" Chesney asked his foreman.

"Jes' two now," was the answer.

"Send three more on up there, and tell 'em to shoot to kill," Chesney directed. "Don't take no chances with that skunk back there. Go after him all spraddled out if he shows up."

ANTICIPATING such a move on the part of Chesney and his gang, Swede hastily prepared to be the first on the ground and to try and take possession of the water gate. He lost little time in securing his rifle and a half dozen clips of ammunition. A short walk around the irrigation ditch brought him to the head of the draw, where the cumbersome water gate was suspended over the ten-foot channel of the little creek.

The crude gate hung on a log beam. It was raised and lowered by means of an ordinary windlass consisting of a cast-iron wheel and a ratchet to hold it. The gate was about six feet high, and when let down across the creek channel would

back up the water sufficiently to permit it to flow off into the canal that led around to Alvin's place.

When he saw the gate, Swede left the canal down which he was walking, descended the slope below and started up the opposite slope to the gate. Letting it down in place would be the work of only a moment—merely releasing the ratchet on the big wheel. He had advanced to within a few rods of his objective when a rifle spoke; a bullet whined angrily only a foot or so from him and bedded itself into the dirt not far away.

There was no shelter of any sort, and Swede paused for a second to survey the situation. Another rifle cracked from a different direction and Swede felt the warm brush of the bullet as it sped past his head.

"We can come closer than that if yuh don't git on back!" a voice warned from behind a boulder higher up on the slope. Realizing that attempts to approach the gate would be futile at this time, Swede beat a hasty retreat. He was half-way back up the opposite slope and soon would have gained the irrigation ditch, when three men put in their appearance, sprang gingerly from their horses and opened fire.

As he climbed up the hill the retreating Swede made a fairly good target, and soon bullets were burying themselves all around him. Just a little farther on was a two-foot ledge. On it was a small boulder, broken and hollowed out. This was not the ideal shelter, but it would serve and Swede hurriedly sought its protection. There was barely room in it for him to turn without exposing some part of himself, but soon he flattened out and could survey the hostile side of the canyon by peering cautiously around the edge of the rock.

By the time he had settled, the three guards who had fired last were coming on down afoot, darting from shelter to shelter, while others kept peppering Swede's little covert. By kicking out loose rocks and scraping away dirt with his heavy shoes, he soon had a fair imitation of the sort of hole he had learned to dig on short notice in France. Settling himself down in this, he calmly prepared to carry the offensive to the other side, and soon had his rifle barrel trained for that exacting job.

He had waited only a moment when a man started to dart from one shelter to another one farther down the slope. As he zig-zagged down the incline Swede caught a line on him, and the canyon roared with the fire of Swede's rifle. The darting figure straightened, threw up both hands and pitched forward, rolling and tumbling. Enraged at this offense, the gang began shooting from all sides.

The most persistent fire came from behind a boulder much like his, across the way, and Swede trained his rifle on this spot. Soon the barest glimpse of a head showed around its edge near the ground, and again the old army rifle roared. The steel ball missed its target, but it splintered a great slab off the sandstone boulder and kicked up a cloud of dust.

"I can shoot that dad-blamed rock clear away from there," Swede mused, patting his rifle affectionately and firing for the second time point blank at the soft rock. It divided into halves and started tumbling down the hill. Two exposed men scurried for shelter, as their companions poured a regular barrage down on Swede's little shelter. The dust made him miss both shots, but clearly he had won the first skirmish.

FOR the next hour everything remained quiet, and it looked like the fight for control of the water would settle down to a siege with neither side taking the aggressive.

Soon it palled on Swede. "I can hold this as long's they can hold theirs," he reflected with a grim smile. And then, "But what am I holdin'?"

They had the water, and that was the main thing. Holding what they had was all that was expected of them. And Swede realized that it would be suicide to try to rush them and lower the water gate. He might have won the skirmish all right, but what was that? Then his eye suddenly fell again on the big gate. Now, if he could only——

It was a slim chance, but slim chances are better than none. He trained his trusty rifle on the little ratchet on the windlass of the gate and squeezed the trigger. From where he lay it was a good hundred yards to his target, and he could see only the edge of the wheel. But, if he could shoot that ratchet off, the gate would crash down to its bed across the creek, and soon the water would be flowing down Alvin's ditch.

His first shot barely nicked the narrow

target, then ricochetted off with a dismal whine. The shot was answered immediately from a half dozen spots around on the opposite slope, sending Swede to a closer crouch in his little hole. Again a quiet spell reigned, until Swede ventured his head out far enough to get a bead on the little ratchet and to fire again. The same menacing barrage came at him, every shot seeming to land within a two-foot circle.

This intermittent fire continued. At every opportunity Swede directed a steel ball at the elusive ratchet and then darted back into his hole. Occasionally he nicked the wheel on the side which was slightly exposed, and as often he registered clean misses. But his hope never wavered, and finally he was rewarded. He made a direct hit on the little ratchet bar and the tiny casting flew into bits. In a twinkling the windlass was wildly unwinding itself as the heavy gate lowered into the water. Then the strategy of the plan became apparent to the guards and loud oaths emitted from their section. But the gate was down, and the water even now was backing up and raising its level.

It was now past noon and the sun was beating down mercilessly. As Swede watched the cool spring water gradually rising up behind the gate it occurred to hm that he was himself growing thirsty. But he stilled his thirst with a firm grip as he planned his next move.

"Better not start gettin' thirsty or hungry yet," he reasoned. "Looks like the only way to figure is for me to do some tall stickin' and not much else. If I leave here, or even try, chances are that I'd get plugged *pronto*. All that bunch can't miss at once. They'd fix that gate, even if I left to get a drink. There ain't much to do but stick. I can do 'thout water longer'n Chesney's steers can. You can bet they'll soon be mighty dry!"

BY MID-AFTERNOON he could hear the water trickling down the ditch just above him in a steady stream. Shortly it would work its way around the base of the wall, and by night it would be tumbling into Alvin's water tank. The thought of what would happen when the water reached the parched and dying flocks at Alvin's place buoyed up Swede, and he grimly determined to stick where he was at all costs.

As soon as dusk started settling over the canyon, he scraped out a little groove along the base of the sandstone rock, sighting it carefully to cover the wheel on the windlass. Just as it grew dark he finished his task, placed his rifle in the groove and saw he had almost a perfect bead on the spot. He left it there.

"It'll be dark as pitch for a couple of hours before the moon gets up," he mumbled, "and I calculate they'll be down monkeyin' around that winch, just as soon's they figure it's safe."

In this he was eminently correct, for no sooner had complete darkness arrived than he heard cautious footsteps around on the slope, and presently there were light steps approaching the water gate. He could barely hear from where he lay, but when he reasoned that they were grouped around the wheel, he moved to his rifle and blazed away. A series of oaths followed by an expiring groan; and then all was still except hurried footsteps which were leaving the spot.

LATER on in the night he heard a horse leave over on the ridge, and after a while a group of riders return. Among them he recognized the voice of Chesney. The big boss himself had come to take charge.

"That danged feller must be part owl," he heard one of the men comment, "'cause he shoots better nights, seems like, than he does days. He got Pancho the fust crack tonight."

The main conference seemed to center around a small cave across the way from which Swede had noted the heaviest fire coming during the day's exchange. "Here's plenty of grub for three or four days," he heard one of the men mumble. That suddenly brought back to Swede's mind his outraged appetite and thirst.

He knew that Chesney would demand some action at once, would send his men into something drastic to cut off the water without delay, so Swede meditated the next move. He was certain Chesney could not force the men to make a frontal attack or to attempt to replace the ratchet and raise the water wheel. Just what would be the logical thing to do? He pondered a moment, and then it dawned on him—an attack from the rear. Nothing to keep them from it, was there? No rear guards behind him? Just a simple question of the group skirting the head of the draw and coming up from behind at leisure and opening fire

on his unprotected rear from both flanks.

This line of reasoning seemed to be borne out by actions he could hear from across. As quietly as possible a number of men left their shelter. Their footsteps gradually died out. Presently, Swede figured, they would appear behind him and open their concentrated fire at twenty-five yards. Then he decided on another bold stroke.

He left his covert as quietly as possible, descended the slope and walked hastily up toward the big headquarters shelter of the gang. As he approached the entrance of the cave a voice halted him.

"Who is it?" said the voice.

"It's me," Swede replied, advancing leisurely.

"Why didn't yuh go 'round with the Old Man and the gang?" the voice came back over a mouthful of grub which the speaker crunched heavily.

"I decided I wanted to eat," Swede answered guilelessly, coming closer and crashing the barrel of one of his revolvers into the fellow's temple. The man wilted off his seat. Swede carried him outside and gave him a roll toward the bottom of the steep slope.

Inside the cave he found enough food to last him indefinitely, almost perfect protection from every angle and with a good opening to cover the water gate. Soon he was in the pot of *frijoles,* and was munching his food contentedly.

He had not moved out of his late little retreat any too soon, for in a few minutes he could outline crouching figures on the opposite rim, deployed at twenty-foot intervals advancing on the spot he had just left. With a loud whoop they all opened fire at once, and a hail of lead kicked up a volcano of dust where Swede had been lying a few minutes earlier.

"By granny, they didn't aim to kill me nor nothin" like that," he mused as he watched them continue to pour the hot lead into the hole. Then all advanced in a body to pull out what might be left of him. When Swede got their approximate range in the faint moonlight that was now beginning, he opened at the gang. As the roar of his rifle died away loud oaths and curses came back. Swede recognized Chesney's voice.

"What in hell yuh doin' shootin' over this way?" he thundered. "It's us, and yuhve winged Tobe!"

"'Scuse it please," Swede answered in mock meekness; and his trusty rifle spat again.

"Mike! Have yuh gone slam crazy?" Chesney demanded excitedly, as the gang scattered. "I'll come over an'——"

Bang! Again Swede's rifle roared.

"Mike!" Chesney fairly bellowed now.

"Mike's down at the foot of the hill, Chesney," Swede replied calmly.

"Then who's that talkin'?" the leader demanded.

"Guess," Swede yelled back.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Chesney cursed, as he darted for shelter.

BY AFTERNOON of the next day, Swede, still secure in his captured cave, began to hear the intermittent bellowing of steers penned down in the valley; and he knew what that meant. They wanted water and there was none. It was now twenty-four hours since he had diverted the stream around to Alvin's place. He knew that the situation would grow acute during the coming night, and before the end of the next day it would be serious indeed.

He was a little surprised that Chesney had not made another move to capture the flood gate before now. Then he told himself that the unscrupulous leader was too cunning to make a break in broad daylight, that whatever he attempted would be under cover of darkness. With the supply of food he had taken with the cave, Swede made himself comfortable. He was almost invincible where he was; and he had fresh, cool water pouring down into Alvin's little ranch.

But his craving for sleep was terrible. It now seemed a plain endurance contest, Either he did without sleep or Chesney's cattle obtained water. The increasing lowing of the cattle told him that the fight was nearing a finish, in one manner or another; and he steeled himself for the end, come when it would.

As the sun slid behind the canyon wall Swede made ready to set his night guard over the narrow little valley, and more especially the water gate. He surveyed his surroundings minutely. The diversion gate was almost directly in front of the opening in the cave, probably thirty yards distant. He set his rifle pointing at the windlass on the gate, as he had done the previous night, and left it there. He marked the barb-wire fence that ran across the east prong of the canyon head and cut off Alvin's place from the big

Chesney ranch. It was beyond the tip of the point that divided the two arms of the canyon, and about sixty yards from the cave.

As on the previous night, the first couple of hours were extremely dark. Swede's ears were keenly attuned to every sound in the canyon. Once he heard a faint noise like the cracking of a tiny twig under a man's foot. He leaped to the stock of his rifle, but he did not hear the sound again.

A faint streak of crimson broke over the eastern crest of the canyon, and darkness began to creep out of the canyon walls. As the moon climbed higher, Swede breathed more easily. He had expected Chesney and his gang to attack during that period of darkness. Nothing had happened.

He stretched and yawned. Apparently the worst was over. The moon was well up, and no opposition was in sight. Evidently Chesney knew when he was licked and probably would be up for a truce in the morning. Desperately Swede fought off sleep, now that the tension was somewhat relieved.

In his estimation of Chesney's determination, however, Johnson was badly mistaken. Sam Chesney had no intention of giving up the fight so soon, as Swede discovered when a sudden twanging of wires aroused him from a half doze about midnight.

Startled, Swede leaped to his feet and, rubbing his burning optics, peered out over the little canyon floor. His first thoughts were of the gate. A glance told him that it was still in place. He listened intently. Bellowing cattle roared down the valley. They seemed so much louder than before. "They must be getting desperate," Swede thought.

Lowing again. Now wide awake, he was positive that the cattle were nearer than they had been earlier in the night. Muffled interrupted bellows now and then indicated that the steers were on the move.

There was the unmistakable, though muffled, twanging of another wire. This time Swede caught the direction. He smothered a startled grunt as he saw at the foot of the opposite wall, two men desperately working on the wire fence that cut off Alvin's little place from the Chesney range. The men were in the deepest shadows of the canyon; and a clump of mesquite on the rim of the wall obliterated the moonlight still more. Standing back of these was a horse; and forking the horse was a person who, in the shadows, looked mighty like Sam Chesney. The rider held a rifle across his left arm; and his face was turned toward the little cave on the side of the canyon wall.

"What the——?" Swede muttered to himself. "They must be going to try to drive the cattle onto Alvin's place. They shore got nerve!"

SWEDE took in the situation quickly. Evidently two of the wires were cut already. In another instant the third would be down. Most likely other members of the gang were driving the cattle toward the opening. In ten minutes, if something was not done, they would be headed toward Alvin's water at a gait that hell and high water could not stop. He upbraided himself for being stupid enough not to expect just such a move from Chesney. It was the most logical thing to do; and he had picked the most logical time to do it, right when the one-man guard would be least expectng it. The water was not going down to the cattle, so Chesney was driving the cattle up to the water, and up Alvin's canyon was the only way of reaching it now. Swede slowly and noiselessly shouldered his rifle, aimed at the general directon of the hands of the man who was doing the cutting, and fired.

Simultaneously Swede yelled, "Stick up your paws and walk this way, *pronto!*" He leaped out of the cave and ran toward the men, one of whom was holding his wrist and yelling in agony. The other cutter held up his hands.

Not Chesney. At the instant the rifle flared in the mouth of the cave he gave his mount the spur and bolted down the trail in the direction of the thirsty cattle, obviously intent upon stampeding the herd. Opposite Swede he swerved and fired. Particles of rock powdered Swede's grim face.

Swede dropped to one knee and fired. The fleeing animal dropped like a plummet. Chesney bolted over the falling horse's head and landed on his spacious seat, fully twenty feet beyond. Simultaneously with his landing, sudden though it was, his hands slid down to two forty-fives.

"Purty quick, Mister Chesney; but not quick enough. I've got you covered from scalp to toe!" Swede explained grimly. "Better ease them forepaws into the ozone!"

Swede now was standing in the full light of the moon, no more than fifty feet from the fallen rider. The position of his hands on his shooting irons substantiated his claims. Gradually, cursing, Chesney raised his hands.

Swede disarmed him. At the first sound of the commotion the unhurt fence-cutter had made a move for his gun and actually had reached it; but the distance was so great that he had little chance to use it, for fear of hitting his boss. It was in this predicament that Swede caught him.

"Put away them irons and come on down here, hombre," he instructed. calmly. "You might assist your pal there, so's he can come on down too." He turned to Chesney. "Your thirsty cattle are headed this way. Send this man down there and order the rest of your gang to turn the cattle back. You stay here at the cave with me. No use tryin' any funny stuff, because your whole outfit couldn't rescue you from me, in this barricade. I guess you realize that."

The dark expression on Chesney's face told that he understood well. He ordered the man down, with word to turn back the cattle. Swede watched every move of his face to see that no false signs passed between the leader and his man.

TEN minutes later a fresh cloud of dust rose down the trail. The bellowing of the cattle increased in frequency, but diminished in volume. It was evident that the men were following orders.

Swede and Chesney sat facing each other for half an hour, at the entrance of the cave. They seldom spoke, save for an occasional warning from Johnson, when Chesney would move in the semi-darkness.

Finally Chesney remarked, the viciousness and defiance all missing from his voice, "I guess I know when I'm licked, feller. T'other day yuh mentioned somethin' 'bout a new contract between me an' yore friend. Mebbe yuh got the right idea. Mebbe we oughter change the 'greement so's it'd be fairer all 'round."

"That sounds better," Swede drawled. "And how 'bout buyin' a little wool—say five hund'ed bucks worth?"

Chesney fidgeted. "Guess—guess I could handle that much, all right," he slowly admitted.

"All right," Swede replied. "I have two contracts in my pocket. We'll get out in the moonlight and sign 'em. After that, mebbe we'll turn some water down your way."

Chesney tediously scrawled his name on the two documents, then kept looking back over them, puzzled. "Say young feller," he finally inquired, "don't see yore name in here anywheres?"

"Don't belong there," Swede replied easily.

"Why? Ain't yuh two pardners?"

"Nope."

"How come, then, yo're takin' such a all-fired int'rest in him?" Chesney asked, his sour face more puzzled than ever.

"We're buddies, hombre."

"Buddies? What's that?"

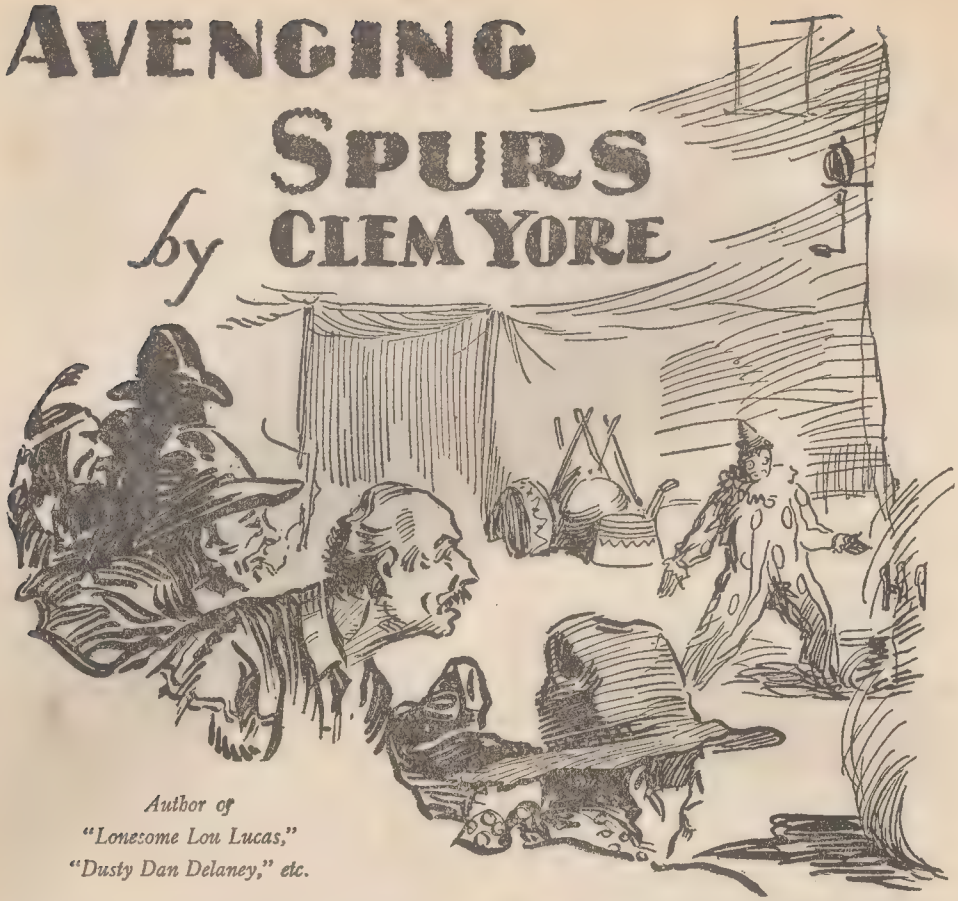
"Somethin' your sort of folks don't know nothin' about," Swede replied wearily, gathering up his scant belongings and heading toward Alvin's shack via the water gate.

BALDY SOURS *next issue* **AND** *by* ***Charles W. Tyler***

THE DAY OF JUDGMENT

AVENGING SPURS

by CLEM YORE



Author of
"Lonesome Lou Lucas,"
"Dusty Dan Delaney," etc.

Barry Shane, a top-hand on the range or under the big-top, smiles as he rides the twisty ones for a circus. But all the time he is fighting a heart-breaking, double-fisted, two-gun battle to find the dry-gulchers who murdered his twin brother, Larry.

CHAPTER I

"I'm going to get the men who got you!"

LARRY and Barry Shane were twin Irish-Texans orphans.

If one had a pain, the other didn't smile. When they were separated it was said one knew of some misfortune to the other when it fell. And any man who picked an unfair fight with either had a two-man battle on his hands. But they loved a laugh, better than a lick, and a good romping time better than "licker"; yet, even in their teens, they were regarded as boys who carried the kick of a mule in either hand. Roping and wrangling longhorns had taught them much. The older they grew the more fond they became of each other.

Wee mother Shane had died when the boys were seventeen and their father had been crushed to death by an outlaw bronc in the corner of a breaking-pen, when they were twenty-three. The sale of the little homestead paid all the debts, and gave their father a first-class burial in the tiny cemetery at Sweetwater, the birthplace of the twins.

For a while the boys stuck together, but wages were poor and cowboys plenty. Something had to be done. Larry decided to strike out and locate opportunity for both. As he had left he had said, "Old hand, you stay close, while I go and lick a bunch of chances for the two of us. But I'll come back, sometime when our birthday is due."

Larry went to the far corner of New Mexico to work for the L standing Bar outfit; whose brand Larry had pictured, in a letter to Barry.

And during the two years he had been away Larry had done well. He was cutting out, grading, picking the beef for

market, making himself valuable. But he had written Barry that he was coming home; coming home for the birthday of the twins. And he would drop down to Texas from Kansas City, as soon as he had delivered fifteen carloads of eight hundred pound three-year-old stuff to Lee Robinson, the commission man.

Now the birthday had arrived, and was nearly past. Sundown was approaching, and Larry had not appeared. Barry was nervous.

Earlier, Barry had sent a wire to the L Standing Bar ranch. In this he had asked for information about his brother. He was expecting an answer any minute. And by way of

diversion he had picked up a book of verse which lay on the table in the bunkhouse of the outfit he was riding for. Aimlessly his fingers turned the pages and casually his eye fell on a poem. It was called The "Gray Horse Troop." The second line got him, and he read the first verse:

All alone on the hillside—
Larry an' Barry an' me;
Nothin' to see but the sky an' the plain,
Nothin' to see but the drivin' rain,
Nothin' to see but the painted Sioux,
Gallopin', gallopin'; "Whoop-whuroo!
The devil in yellow is down in the mud!"
Sez Larry to Barry, "I'm losin' blood."

One of the boys returned from the neighboring town.

"Bad news, old cowboy," he said. "Here's that telegram you was wantin'." Barry opened the message and read:

YOUR BROTHER MYSTERIOUSLY KILLED IN KANSAS CITY. SHALL WE ARRANGE TO TAKE CHARGE OF

THE BODY. WE WILL DEFRAY ALL EXPENSE. IT IS BEING HELD AT KANSAS CITY MORGUE.

STUNNED, cold, stricken with an intangible stagnation of mind and body, Barry re-read the message; and then he dropped the telegram to the table, where it fell beside the open book of verse. Involuntarily he read:

All alone on the hillside—
Larry an' Barry an' me;
Two of us livin' and one of us dead—
Shot in th' head, and God!—how he bled!
"Larry's done up," sez Barry to me;
Divvy his cartridges! Quick! gimme three!"
While nearer an' nearer an' plainer in view,
Galloped an' galloped the murderin' Sioux.

Barry roused, looked from the door and waved a cowboy to him. It was the waddie who had brought him the wire.

"Say, Slats, I've gotta go to Kansas City. My brother has been killed. That's all I know. I was wondering if you could stake me to some dinero? I've got some, but I might need a lot. I'm going to give Larry a first-class funeral.

"Sure. I'll ride to town with you and get you a hundred. But, Barry, your brother was shot."

"What?"

"Yep, shot. It's in all the papers. He was shot at the K. C. stock yards. They showed it to me in the store."

Barry's gray eyes hardened.

"I'll get a paper in town," he commented, almost in a detached tone. Yet Slats winced at the sound of the youth's voice.

"Larry was workin' for the L Standin' Bar, wasn't he?" asked Slats. "And that's close by the town of *Salida del Sol,* ain't it?"

"Yep, he was. *Salida del Sol,* that's 'sunrise' in Mex' talk. The cowmen call it just Salida. I reckon it's a strong-for-tough cow country. Larry wrote me it was all broke up and chockful of bad hombres, American-Mexicans, and crooked cowboys who made a pretty fair living stealing the calf crop of the biggest spreads. Yep, Salida, was the place. I wish now I had gone there with Larry."

"Was you reading that thing, Barry?" Slats nodded toward the open book on the table.

"Uh-huh. Seems spooky, me doing that, don't it? That poem, looks like, was just meant for me. That's your book, Slats, I wonder if I could tear out that set of verses? I'd like to memorize them."

"Sure, here they are!" Slats ripped the page from the book and handed it to Barry. "Now let's get going toward town. You'll have to romp to catch the cannonball north, and get you some town boy rigging, too."

THIRTY hours later Barry, who had identified his brother, was seated at the desk of the Chief of Police of Kansas City. The Chief was talking; telling Barry all he knew of the tragic passing of Larry Shane.

"Your brother had sold his cattle and was standing on the runways of the pens looking over a lot of New Mexico cows being unloaded and shunted into the chutes. All of a sudden, one of the buyers said, he let out a yell, pointed at a bunch of big steers, and declared that these belonged to his outfit, the L Standing Bar. The cowboys handling the unloading of that shipment heard what Larry said, and right then there was a near riot.

"Later, I haven't been able to find out exactly when, your brother was shot, down among the pens where that bunch of cattle was corralled for the night. Lonesome place, it was."

"Have you a line who did the killing?"

"No, Barry, a shot was heard, and the body found. The man who discovered Larry said he was cold when he touched him. The fellow who heard the shot thought the time was around nine o'clock. The stock-handlers for those pens had finished feeding and were off duty until eleven. It was pitch-dark that night."

"You got any ideas, or hunches, clues, or whatever it is you coppers work on?"

"No. Nothing definite. We thought at first it might have been some of those boys who had heard what Larry said about the cows they were unloading. That shipment came from west of Salida."

"What was the outfit selling those steers?"

"The B Bar N T. That stands for Big Nate Towers, a cowman as large, in his way, as the owner of the L Standing Bar, so I'm told."

"Any arrest made?"

"No. How could we make arrests? We didn't have a shred of evidence to tag a suspicion on. The Towers men had alibis."

"Where are the B Bar N T boys now?"

"Gone back to New Mexico. They started the afternoon after Larry had been killed."

Barry stared from the window. Then he swung about and looked at the Chief. "Could you just let it be known, secret-like, that Larry was to be buried here?"

"But you have applied for permission to take the body to Texas."

"I don't want anybody to know. I'm a lone wolf, I reckon, and being that's so, I'd like as little publicity as I can get. Can't that be arranged?"

"I think so. Do you aim to be the law in this case?"

"I don't aim to let it ride. He was my twin, Chief."

"Yes, and the two of you are as like as one bean is to another. You're Irish, ain't you, Barry?"

"Shane," smiled Barry. "Don't that sound like it?"

"Then you'll take a bit of advice, I'm Irish, too. Don't go off half-cocked and get yourself killed, or hurt somebody that's innocent."

"I won't; I'm aiming to go slow. How about Larry's boss, has he been wiring you about this case?"

"Two or three wires a day. He offers five thousand reward. And he wants me to wire him about funeral arrangements."

"Telegraph him you're writing, and then write him that I was here and took away the body. I'll be hitting for Salida, some of these days; but right now I don't want that country to know Larry had a brother, especially a twin."

"You're a fox, Barry. Carrying a hunch, right now; and I'll bet those B Bar N T boys didn't have a thing to do with that shooting. How was Larry's habits? And was he straight?"

"Do you see that crack in the floor? That seam where those boards come together?"

"Uh-huh."

"They're straight, ain't they?"

"Sure. As straight as a ruler-edge."

"That was Larry Shane, Chief, and, leaving that a-singing in your ears, I'll be sayin' goodbye."

HALF an hour later Barry was being shown the exact spot where Larry's body had been found. Here, one of the stockyards crew left him alone; alone save for a lantern with which he searched the stock-trampled earth around the pens. Suddenly a gleaming object caught his eye. He picked it out of the soft muddy earth and saw that it was a hand-chased, silver-inlaid spur rowel. He stared at it, a long time, then placed it in a pocket. Barry remained around the region of Larry's murder for more than an hour; then visited an undertaking establishment to which he had ordered his brother's corpse taken from the morgue.

Here he gave orders for shipment of the body to the small Texas town where his mother and father had been interred. After meeting all official needs for the removal of the corpse from Kansas City he went to bed.

The next morning early Barry visited the Crockett Spur and Bit Company shop where he exhibited the rowel he had found.

"Could you make me a pair of those?" he asked.

"Sure," said the manager, "but it will take special time."

"All right, make them. And send them to this name and address."

Barry wrote his name and address on a slip of paper.

"That's mighty fine work," commented the manager. "We'll have to be over careful on this job. I suppose you want them exact duplicates of this rowel?"

"Yes, and I don't want that rowel injured. It is very precious to me. And please make a legal record of this work; better photo it."

"These designs *are* great," said the manager, fixing a jeweler's glass to his eye. "On this side is a coiled rattle snake. And around it two road-runners. You've seen chaparral cocks, eh?"

"Yep," said Barry, alive with surprise, for he had not known, until then, of the exquisite nature of the silver work.

"And on this side is a Mexican *vaquero* roping a steer. I don't know whether we can finish this work on both rowels, in two weeks. My men don't do such fancy work very fast. It's tiring on the eyes."

"Take your time. I want an exact copy, size and all."

"Very well. How about marking the

duplicates, for identification?"

"Yes, do that. Stamp a small "B" inside the rivet socket of each.

With the body of Larry lying in the baggage coach, and Barry staring blankly out of a car window, the southbound express swept across Kansas that afternoon. And to the *"clickety-click, clickety-click"* of the spinning wheels, hitting the rail ends, Barry's mind raced to the measure of that poem! "The Gray Horse Troop." At last he brought out the page Slats had given him and read with a poignant melancholy, beating through him like a pain.

All alone on the hillside—
Larry an' Barry an' me;
Flat on our bellies, an' pourin' in lead—
Seven rounds left, an' the horses dead—
Barry a-cursin' at every breath;
Larry beside him, as white as death;
Indians gallopin', gallopin' by,
Wheelin' an' squealin' like hawks in the sky!

Brrr! Brrr!

The locomotive's whistle sounded like a living thing, sounded like an outraged being, a being distraught, rushing, pell-mell, toward some fate for which it held nothing but a profound contempt. This thought staggered Barry.

He folded the jagged page precisely, and carefully placed it in a tally-book he carried. Then he mused, fiercely.

"Larry Shane, brother of mine, listen to me! I'm going to get the men who got you! Stay with me, and don't let me make a fool out of myself. I've got to go slow, but all the same I've got to go."

Over and over, all the long night through, to the surge and beat of his stricken brain, to the whip and the click of the flying wheels, there coursed through Barry's mind those two lines:

All alone on the hillside—
Larry an' Barry an' me.

Chapter II

BARRY TURNS CIRCUS-MAN

AFTER Larry's funeral, and when Barry had worked long enough to pay what debts he owed, he made the decision to start west. The time had been long, and the waiting hard; for Barry desired above all other things to be riding the "broke-up" country in and around the L Standing Bar, the outfit for which his brother had worked. Yet he wanted Salida to forget the murder; for an ever-present prompt cautioned him to take his time.

He decided that he would drift into Salida; that he would work his way there, unannounced, and if possible, unknown. To the generous offers of Jack Tilton, the owner of the L Standing Bar, who had admired Larry so, to pay all of the expense incident to Larry's death, Barry had replied with polite rejections. Larry was his brother and his death had been a personal matter.

One thing sent a joy through Barry. Jack Tilton did not know that Larry and Barry were twins. This had been evidenced by the few letters the old man had written to Barry. Well enough! When he arrived in Salida it would be like a ghost stalking there—riding there, sometime, in the bright moonlight, and running across old friends or foes of Larry's. The thought, like so many mental pictures which come to twins, pleased and satisfied Barry. He loved to dwell upon it. It seemed a portent to him.

He sold his pony, saddle and rigging; but kept his spurs, into the shanks of which he had riveted the replicas of the spur he had found near the spot where Larry had been shot down. The rowel that had been used for a pattern he carried sewed in a bit of soft buckskin. Then he started for Kansas; for it was spring, and the rains were nearly over.

At one little town he bumped into a circus. An idea hit him. Why not try the circus game for that summer? He asked Bologny, a canvas-man, for the route of the show.

"We goes from hell to breakfast, zigzaggin' across Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado New Mexico, Arizona, and then to winter quarters in California," answered Bologny.

"New Mexico, did you say?"

"You bet, all over it."

"Salida, maybe?"

"We made that dump the last time. I remember 'cause we all got in a jam there. That's a country chockful of riding and roping fools. And this circus carries a little to-do wild west show. And we has a game of advertising our show by offering fifty dollars to the man who rides Electricity, our trained bucking-mule. At Salida a guy rode the mule, and the boss tried to cheat him out of the

change. He paid it, though. Maybe we will go back, and maybe we won't; but we'll sure do a big business if we does. Thinking of joining a circus?"

"Maybe."

"Then don't. Look at me. I was a fighter, once; and I was making money. Then I joined this outfit. Was the champ, the Mysterious Hoodwinked Middleweight! That's what I was. I got a hundred a week, and expenses; and I was to take on all comers. I did it, too. Went bim-bamming up and down this man's country kicking paloozas to sleep in every hick-town we made. Then Curly Tarleton, he's the boss, edged me into a young bimbo who knocked me for a goal, and he took my place.

"I went on as a canvas-man. We carries a fight-champ still. And he's billed, too, as The Mysterious Hoodwinked Middleweight Champion. Fifty bucks we gives to the boy what stays three rounds with him. There's Curly Tarleton talking to the champeen right now."

Barry strolled toward the spot where the proprietor of—TARELTON'S TREMENDOUS, TRIUMPHAL, STUPENDOUS CIRCUS AND WORLD FAMOUS SIDE SHOW—was talking to a thug like youth whose bulging muscles were filling out the lines of a black-braided, loud-checked suit of clothes.

On the way Barry had to worm a path through a milling crowd surrounding some animal wagons. Of a sudden he felt a hand writhing into a hip pocket. He slapped the spot, caught a thin wrist, and jerked his wallet from the fingers of a rat-faced youth carrying a tray of pop-corn and peanuts. Instantly the youth yelled. And as if the very air had been surcharged with a galvanic force all faces turned toward the spot whence came that cry.

"Hey rube! Hey rube! Hey rube!"

IT WAS the fight-cry of all circusdom. And it awoke the echoes in, under and around the shabby tents. Attachés of the show rushed to the spot, some with pick handles, others with clubs, but all of them on the run. Barry was taken by surprise. But he stuffed the wallet back into his overalls and held onto the wrist of the thief.

The canvas-man Barry had accosted but an instant before stood out as the only friendly being in that ringed group of human monstrosities. "He tried to steal my money," announced Barry to the ex-Mysterious Hoodwinked Middleweight Champion.

The pop-corn boy cried, "He's a liar! He bumped me. Nearly knocked all my pop-corn into the dirt, and I took my Sunday swing at him, that's all. Get him, youse guys!

A fist at the end of a long arm, darted toward Barry's head. It had been aimed by a tall, desolate-looking thug who carried a hickory bar in his other hand. But the fist missed. And the next instant the thug's head struck the hard earth. Barry Shane's disengaged hand had swung with the speed of a snake to the point of the lank man's chin. Then the fight was on. The pop-corn vender was second man down.

And as fast as that motley crew charged within reach of Barry's lashing fists it lost members. Taleton rushed to the spot. He was a huge man, paunchy, thick, hairy of face, and jutting of chin. Barry centered his sight on Tarleton's curly head as the man crowded through the ranks of his underlings.

But all the time Barry kept his arms flailing and his knuckles crashing into pulpy faces. At last he cleared a small space before a hippopotamus cage. Back to this wagon, the scent of the animals stinging his nostrils, the faces of the men he had knocked down, and those who were encircling him in indecision or fear seemed to madden the boy.

"Come on, you skunks!" he yelled. "It'll take twice as many misfits as this show's got to pull me away from this wagon."

The canvas-man advanced upon Barry a piece of tent-stake in his right hand. Then Tarleton yelled.

"Don't hit that hick with that stick, Bologny!"

"I ain't gonna," cried Bologny. "I didn't bring it to dink him with. Didja see 'im, Tarleton? Didja see his left?"

"I'll say. What's your name, kid?" Tarleton said, advancing upon Barry. "We ain't going to dink you."

"Barry."

"Irish, ain't you?"

Barry smiled, and that settled it. With a wave of a monstrous arm Tarleton dispersed the crowd of belligerent bohunks and circus men. But Bologny remained, and with him the thug-like youth with the bulging muscles—the middleweight fighter.

Again Barry smiled; this time at Bologny.

"Take him along," exploded Bologny to Curly Tarleton. "He'll do!"

"Do you want to join this outfit?" spoke Curly.

"Great! Can I?" asked Barry.

"What can you do?"

"I'm a cowboy. Mostly, a rider and roper."

Bologny sidled to Curly's elbow and whispered up at him.

"Boss, he's got a left. He's got a natural left that's sure-enough death when it lands. And his right, an, cripes! I'll look after 'im."

"Alright, Barry, you go with Bologny. He'll take you down to the gang boss and get you on the books and show you what's near-and-next-to-do. How's forty-five and found?"

"Suits me," grinned Barry and that's how he became a circusman.

RIDING in the parades, chambermaiding horses, driving wagons, riding crow-hopping bucking broncs twice a day, Barry moved on with the show across three states; and all the while, back of the side shows, in clown-alley, on board trains, as they rolled across the prairies, Bologny taught Barry what he knew of the fight game. All he knew? Yes, and more; for Bologny had found the weakness of the middle weight champ who was one of the features of the circus. And as he would box he would shout.

"Counter with that right, kid, counter into the bread basket! That's it; but not so hard. I'm getting along and you don't want to have to pull it outa me, do you?" Day after day it went on like this. Polishing, teaching, looking for weaknesses, seeing nothing but improvement. Bologny at last thought the hour was ripe. He went to Curly and told him what he had been doing. And Curly had smiled, smiled a meaning smile which meant that delight was in his heart.

"Tell him," he replied, "to get ready to fight at Pierre. That'll give him three weeks. He'll want some road work to get him wind, won't he?"

"No. He's like a goat, now. He ain't no apple knocker. He's salted down with Irish, sleeps on the grass nine months out of the year with the stars for covers. He's clean as a pup's tooth inside and outside. That makes a difference; but I'll jog him whenever I can. Can I have a buggy to ride along with him?" Curly nodded.

"Get him ready. At Pierre, South Dakota, I want him to take Knock-Out Swasey like Grant took Richmond. Work up a little grudge, eh? You know. Set a match to Knock Out's pride. Get 'em to mix a little, but don't let Barry turn loose. Knock Out might fall apart. He's as yellow as a dandelion in bloom, when he's losing."

"You just wants Swasey whipped, ain't it?"

"No, I want a new champ. Swasey has been hollering for more jack, the bum; and after all I've done for him. Say, if Barry whips him, Swasey leaves the show. How's that for news for Barry?"

"That'll be like the Declaration of Independence was to Paul Revere. Barry'll be r'aring to go."

And so it was that Bologny, head filled with many things, but heart full of mirth, because the man who broke him was going to go as he had gone, went about among the circus men with a twinkle in his eye and a grin upon his face. Every afternoon he and Barry drove off in Curly's own rig. Where they went nobody knew; but when Barry returned he made for the showers, and Bologny went along, to rub him down.

Ten days before they reached Pierre, Bologny whispered to Swasey just before he flew out to wallop a local pug. "Say, Knock Out, that Barry is out there trying to get a line on you. And he's been saying he could knock you for a row of alley bungalows whenever he wanted to."

"He what?"

"Honest, that hick thinks he's smart. He's stout, but if I was you I'd spill him some chatter. Look at the old man, he's sitting beside that curry-comb-expert right now."

Knock Out stared around and saw Barry beside Curly.

"Maybe he thinks he can edge into my pants," he remarked.

"Curly Tarleton is listening to 'im, anyhow," said Bologny. "Why don't you shove a knuckle in under his nose, tonight?"

"Wait'll I climb out of this ring. Where'll he be?"

"Shall I stall him for you?"

"Get him outside of my dressing tent."

"Sure."

AFTER the bout Knock Out looked around for his second.

Bologny was vanishing into Clown Alley and with him was Barry. The two were laughing. Knock Out bounded after them and caught up with the pair under a small light outside of his quarters.

"Say, you," he said, glaring at Barry, "if I hear any more of your mouth you won't be able to drink milk."

Barry smiled; Swasey led with a vicious right hand wallop which swung him around as he missed. The next instant Barry's arms were around him and Swasey couldn't move. Bologny yelled and several men ran to the spot. In the lead was Curly Tarleton.

"What's come off here?" he asked. Knock Out burst into profane accusation of imaginary grievance.

"You're jealous, Knock Out," jibed Curly. Swasey sneered.

"Say, I can kick him loose from his shoes with one arm tied back of me. Put him on any old time."

"How about a fight just for the show people, some night when we're laying over after the performance?"

"Suits me."

"How about you, Barry?"

"He can't any more than kill me," smiled Barry.

"Pierre is where that'll be, boss. We've got a day to kill there after we show," broke in Bologny.

"All right, Pierre it is. In the big tent, immediately after the tent is empty."

"How many rounds?" asked Knock Out Swasey.

"Until there's one of you quits. Me, I'll be referee. Reg'lar rules go. Water buckets, seconds, three minutes on and a minute off and ten seconds for a knock-out."

"Bo," sneered Swasey, "is that music to you?"

"I ain't got nothing ag'in you," Knock Out," answered Barry, "and I ain't saying you ain't good; but you've done a lot of talking and I just couldn't crawfish now. Pierre it is, and may the best man win."

When Curly walked off with Barry he asked, "Do you think you can whip him?"

"I believe I can. I noticed tonight that he don't like 'em in the belly. He's fast, but he can't keep my right out of his lunch room. But, Mister Tarleton, I can't go to California with you even if I whip him. I'll be leaving the show in New Mexico."

"All right, stay with me until we reach Salida. Maybe there's a fellow there I'll want you to tame."

CHAPTER III

SINISTER NEWS

BARRY felt that events were shaping themselves according to his desires. He would go into Salida as a prize fighter, a rowdy of the circus. This would permit him to avail himself of his incognito. But he'd have to have an alias. Oh, well, that'd come out, all right. The thing was now to whip Knock Out Swasey, and do it clean and fast.

The show rolled on; the business was good. Nebraska made a lot of money for Curly Tarleton. And now the outfit was getting a play from cowboys and stockmen on the wild-west show part of the circus. Electricity, the trained bucking-mule, a head-and-tail-spinner, was setting the volunteer riders down, one, two, three as fast as they'd crawl onto his back.

Fresh buckers were bought, and these gave Barry lots of fun. He missed the breaking pen, and he longed for the crimpy ones to wake up of a morning as he started after the strays from the bed-grounds.

One day Barry saw a bill board. On it was the announcement of the rodeo, the great frontiersmen's show, at Belle Fourche, South Dakota. Belle Fourche was up north of Deadwood. It offered big top-money prizes for riding and roping. Barry's heart ached to be in and among those classy boys who would be making that show. He went to Bologny and spoke the yearning of his mind. Bologny got an idea and gave it to Curly Tarelton.

"Boss," he said, "that kid's aching to go back to a cowboy's game. Why not let him slide up to Belle Fourche, with me and a bill poster, and while he's trying for the big money I'll promote the grudge fight between him and Knock Out Swasey. The show ends in Belle Fourche the day before we make Pierre. That'll give us time to interest the rodeo

crowds in this big fight we're pulling off, and maybe you can make a grand out of it? I'll take some paper along, some of that Mysterious, Hoodwinked Middleweight Champion paper, and we'll bill Deadwood and Belle Fourche and get some jack. You ain't throwing any money away, are you?"

"Say, Bologny, you're all right. It never occurred to me to pull a money bout, but this looks good. Before the Pierre audience gets out of the tent I'll have the ticket sellers pass among it and sell the pasteboards. If Barry was to win at Belle Fourche that advertising would jam the tent. Go ahead. Take Barry up there, but don't you get him hurt, see?"

And so it came about that Barry, Bologny, and a bill poster took train for Belle Fourche. Curly Tarleton wired Barry's entrance money for the riding and steer-roping events and entered Barry under the name of: BARRY HEAD, CHAMPION RIDER AND ROPER OF TARLETON'S CIRCUS, AND THE NEXT MIDDLE WEIGHT CHAMPION PUGILIST OF THE WORLD. When Barry walked up to the rodeo's office he got a great reception. The management cooperated with Bologny and the town and rodeo grounds were plastered with the Pierre date of Tarleton's show.

THE first day Barry rode his bronc and got day-money in the roping. The second day he was tied with a top-hand for first in the riding and got second money at roping. The third day his horse fell with him, just outside of the chute, pinning him down; but when the bronc got to its feet Barry was in the saddle. The judge gave him a re-ride. And after the last man had ridden Barry climbed a chute and dropped into a saddle. The gate was thrown wide and out came the horse, tearing in map leaps and landing stiff legged and four footed in jerky bucks, which shook Barry's back teeth; but the boy's spurs were raking and scraping him from mane to pumping flanks. And all the time, with hat waving in a hand held high, and a grinning face turned to the stands, Barry was staying with the bronc and riding him ragged.

But those spurs!

On a top pole of the saddling-chutes many cowboys sat and watched. One bull-dogger who had caught a glimpse of the rowels in Barry's spurs, hopped from the fence as Barry came up and after the congratulations were over nudged Barry and said, "Kid, the John Laws ain't after you, are they?"

"No, why?"

"The last time I saw those rowels you're wearing was in the shanks of a pair of spurs in Salida. The fella what owned 'em lost 'em; then he was picked up dead. I didn't know. I thought I'd ask you." There was foreboding in the way he looked at Barry.

Barry was thrilled. At last, he hoped, he had found a clue to his brother's murderer.

"I got these from the Crockett Bit and Spur Company from a catalogue," he said to the man. "Curly Tarleton gave 'em to me. Where's this Salida town you speak of?"

"New Mexico. Where you from?"

What was he to say? He wanted to lie, he wanted to reply that he was from the Pacific slope; but he knew that the bulldogger had seen him rope, and the little old, Red River loop he built would have convicted him. Lass-roping technic is known to cowmen, and Texas has a way all of its own. So he said, "I'm from the Gulf Coast country of South Texas."

"Ever know a cowboy by the name of Shane?"

Barry's eyes riveted upon the man's face.

"No," he answered. "Where was he from?"

"I dunno, but there was a Larry Shane, who looked enough like you to be your brother, and he come to Salida, I heard, from Texas. I thought of him the first day I seen you build a throat-latch loop on your first steer. How about this fight you're going to have in Pierre?"

"It ought to be good. The other boy's top-notch, and he hates me. We're going to a finish. Coming over?"

"I reckon I can't. I ain't won no money, dogging, and I'll have to borrow some from the other hands to make the next bronc show." Barry took a chance.

"If you want to go I can maybe get you a job dogging with our show. We're hopping over into Montana and Wyoming from Pierre, and you'd get railroad fare and a little jack for jumping on some old magpie's horns twice a

day. I'll take you with me!"

"My name's Mose Tinkham, cowboy, shake! I'm going to throw in with you."

"All right, meet me and my pardner down to rodeo headquarters in about an hour. I've got the first riding money and second on the roping, and I'm going to get my checks and the bucking trophy saddle in a little while."

"I'll be there, with bells on, Head," said Mose.

AND so he was. When Barry went to Pierre the train he rode on was filled with several hundred cowboys and cattlemen bent on seeing a real cowboy whip a prize fighter. And it was a salty and vigorous crowd, jubilant, noisy, and wild. It went in a body to see the afternoon performance of the circus and bought an entire section of seats for the fight after the evening performance. Tarleton was tickled. He hunted up Barry and Bologny and congratulated them on their success at Belle Fourche and confided to Barry that if he defeated Knock Out Swasey he would win twenty per cent of the gate.

The afternoon passed, night came, and the crowds from the town milled around the side show tents early. It was going to be a whopper and Tarleton's face was a study. Barry had asked him for a job for Mose Tinkham and Mose had made good in a demonstration event down the sawdust of the main tent's track. He was to go on that night.

At supper, Barry, Bologny and Mose ate together in a down town cafe. Barry wanted an opportunity to talk with Mose about that spur. It came rather unexpectedly, in Barry's room.

"Remember now," Mose had said, while they were waiting for Bologny, "that I wasn't pumping nobody, for I ain't caring a dern, but I know you lied to me about them spurs. I told Curly Tarleton that he ought to seen you giving the steel to that last horse you rode at Belle Fourche, and he puffed up like a toad. Then I thought to make it good and told him the spurs he had given to you flashed in the sun like knives. 'What spurs?' he says. Then I knew you lied to me. Where'd you get 'em, kid?"

"In K.C. I found one rowel and had copies of it made, and fited those rowels in the shanks of my spurs."

"Barry, you're right, the spurs ain't the same, but the rowels is. I was examining 'em this afternoon. I'd know that coiled snake and roping vaquero and road runner, any place."

"Say, Mose, what about them things? Do you think I killed somebody and stole them spurs? Tell me about them."

"No, I don't say you killed somebody, but the last man what wore them killed a man. And to keep from getting catched for that shooting he went back to Salida and shot another fellow—the first man who owned them spurs.

"How'd you find that out?"

"I went to Kansas City as a hand for the B Bar NT outfit. Larry Shane accused our boss of stealing cows belonging to his spread, the L Standing Bar. He said he recognized them cows as they were unloaded. I don't know how he savvied that; but he must of had the goods for he was killed back of the feeding-pens in the K.C. yards that very night."

"Where do the spurs fit into that story?"

"The fella what bumped off Larry lost a rowel to them spurs on that Kansas City trip. When he got back to Salida he hung up them spurs, minus that rowel, on the peg where he had stolen them from before he went to K.C. And when he was doing this the owner of them spurs come in and caught him. Right there was where that owner got killed to keep him from causing trouble. Of course, I ain't got no proof, but that's the way I figured it."

"What was the name of the man who did this killing?"

"Smoke Malone, a bad hombre, if ever there was one. I quit Salida over night because I feared Smoke was going to kill me on account of what I knew."

"Did you see him shoot Larry Shane?"

"No, but I heard Larry tell Smoke and Big Nate Towers that he recognized some of the cows they were selling as belonging to his outfit, the L Standing Bar. Smoke was missing when Larry was killed. I think he followed Larry to the pens and shot him when a switch engine was puffing up and down a siding. And I think Nate Towers told Smoke to do the killing."

"Here's how I come to leave Salida, and leave it fast. I was in Smoke's room, one evening, before Larry was shot, and seeing a fancy spur in Smoke's grip, I picked it up, looked at it, and recog-

nized it as belonging to this fellow who was afterwards killed. There'd been talk about them spurs being stole. I looked at Nate and Smoke. Then I grinned and put down the spur."

"There's where I made the mistake. I told both of them birds by that grin that I was hep to who stole them spurs. Then we went home to Salida. And when we got there, the very next day or so, this fellow what owned them spurs was found shot and the spurs hanging to his kitchen door with one rowel missing. Nate Towers told me to take a fence repair outfit and go out alone to mend a string of wire fence. I knew what he meant by that. I was to get away off, and then Smoke was to ride out and kill me. I made an excuse, went to town, and caught a train for Cheyenne."

"Who owned the spurs?"

"Henry Josse."

"And everybody knew his spurs, eh?"

"Yes, everybody in the cow business down there. They were given him by a Mexican. Montiquez was his name, boss of the Dolorez ranch. Josse worked for him as foreman before he took up a homestead at Salida. Them spurs was said to be worth all kinds of money, because when Josse wore them they *would* act as money. Are you going to Salida?"

"I aim to, why?"

"I see why you're pumpin' me. You're related to Larry Shane."

"I'm his twin brother and I'm going to get his killer."

"Old hand, stay away from there. You're the spitting image of Larry, and if they killed him they'll kill you."

Bologny entered at that instant and the subject changed.

AFTER the grand entry Barry and Bologny went into executive session on the matter of the approaching fight. Curly came in when the performance was about half through. His face was drawn and he looked wretchedly disconsolate as he dropped to a chair.

"Tough luck to kill a man tonight," he said, "and this is the first bad accident of the season."

"Who got killed, Chief?" asked Bologny.

"That bull-dogger, Mose. He was to dog that big blue steer, Bologny, and I reckon he got skeered he couldn't hold him. He told one of the wranglers that he didn't like to bull-dog in a tent, was afraid the ox might get loose and hurt somebody. So he took a singletree and beat it over the neck of that blue and what's the result? When he come out and Mose dropped onto his horns his neck was so sore and weak that Mose houlihaned him before he knew it and that ox somersaulted, came down with Mose under him, and broke Mose's back. I got to him and we carried him to the doctor. On the way he whispered to me just these words, *'Tell Barry to take them spurs to Easy-going Smith.'* I tried to figure out what he meant but them were his last words. He just died. Who is Easy-going Smith, Barry?"

"I don't know."

"Mose never had any papers on him, not even an undershirt. That means the potter's field, I reckon," said Curly.

"No it don't You bury him *right*. I'll pay for it."

Curly moved away, assuring Barry that he would give Mose a decent burial. The show went on, and laughter and applause, blare of bands, cries of clowns, told that the audience had forgotten that a man had been killed. Out of the bedlam of sound came a deep stillness broken at length by the portentous long roll of a drum which told of the culmination of the leap-for-life trapeze act. Chariots moved into the main entrance for the Roman-spectacle.

Bologny touched Barry. "It won't be long now, kid," he said. "Them charioteers is all set for the last act. After them Roman wagons fill the tent with dust the bohunks will set up the fight ring. Remember now what I told you. Into his vitals, all the time. Take one to give one, and keep your button covered. Into his middle—then, zowie! onto his jaw."

But Barry did not hear. He was thinking of Mose's loss and the enigma of his last words.

"Come on, kid, get off that rigging and hop into your trunks. You're not a cowboy, any more, you're a fighter from this time on," cracked Bologny, trying to distract Barry.

"You bet," flinched Barry. "From this time on."

His lips drew back, exposing his teeth. In his heart Bologny joyed. "It's just too bad for Knock Out Swasey," he thought, "that kid's smelling blood and he's got to have his meat."

Chapter IV

DESTINY TANGLES BARRY

LAUGHING don't mean a thing," mused Barry, as he stepped into the ring. "These folks are laughing and hurrahing now, waiting for something to start. In a little while they'll be laughing and bellowing at the sight of the two of us hurting each other. Mose got killed, and they laughed. If I get a haymaker on the point they'll laugh. If I crack Knock Out until he'll hear the birdies sing, then they'll laugh so hard you won't be able to hear Curly counting the seconds."

He slipped off the dirty bath robe Bologny had given him for luck; for in this robe Bologny had won the right to travel with Curly Tarleton's show as the Mysterious, Hoodwinked Middleweight Champion. What a vision that howling mob of men beheld!

Barry's muscles were smooth as velvet, under the downpour of the lowered arcs. Only when he moved a bit, when he jerked an arm or a leg, suddenly would they whip into cords with a snap betokening elasticity and power. He looked fit to fight, indeed. Clear eyed, calm, his hair tousled a bit, his eyes flashing, his teeth gleaming white back of his smile, he won that crowd instantly. Then came Knock Out Swasey, hopping over and through two rings, and across a mass of properties.

"Hi, Hick!" he sneered as a greeting to Barry when he had crawled into the ring. "Hear 'em? That applause is for me!"

"Take that hand they're giving you, Knock Out," retorted Barry, "when you crawl out of these ropes nobody will stampede hisself giving you the glad-to-meetcha clap."

Knock Out Swasey stepped close to Barry. "For a dime's worth of whatnots I'd knock them words back through your teeth," he shot.

"You'll have plenty time in just a little while. Here's Curly."

"Even if you win this fight I'm going to knock you out," snarled Knock Out Swasey. "Wait till I get my fist in your kidney and my mouth to your ear. I'm going to tell you something. Something, that will make you sick at the stomach."

Curly ducked under the ropes and lifted a hand. The house stilled. Barry's eyes followed Knock Out to his corner. Curly began.

"Ladies and Gents," he shouted stridently, "this bout is for blood, and the champeen crown of all Circusdom. On my right is Knock Out Swasey, undefeated champeen, who carries dynamite in his left and paralysis in his right. He's criss-crossed this country and the Canuck wheat belt and won every battle by a knock out. (Cheers.)

"On my left is Barry Head, champeen cowboy rider of the wurrld, and challenger for Swasey's title. Barry Head has a left hand like the strike of a sidewinder, and a right that means sudden death when it connects. (Cheers.) One moment, until I talk with these boys, for this is a grudge fight, ladies and gents, and won't be stopped until one or the other is counted out; and as soon as I'm through giving the fighters their orders the battle will be on."

He called the two men to the center of the ring, and swiftly told them the rules. "No fouls," he said. "And that means no fouls. And I'm speaking to you, Knock Out, understand?"

"How do you get that way?"

"Never mind. If you hit low that mob of cowboys, out there, from Belle Fourche, will make it hard for you. And I don't want this tent tore down. Hit clean, break when I tell ya and go as far and long as you can. Let's go. Bell!"

The fight was on and the mob stilled.

KNOCK OUT leaped at Barry like a panther, but Barry sidestepped and Knock Out slammed into the ropes. Turning around, he exposed a face filled with shocked surprise. The crowd cat-called and booed. Barry laughed at Knock Out, who this time stepped gingerly forward feinting and side-ducking and working Barry into a neutral corner. Then he lunged, just as he thought Barry was about to attempt a right step to the side.

But when he led, out shot Barry's left, stung him in the mouth and snapped back his head. Knock Out reached for a clinch, for he was hurt, and almost embraced a corner post. Once more the crowd yelled. Knock Out then threw caution aside. He realized, for the first time, that he had a fighter in front of him; a boxer who had waited for his lead and then beat him to the blow by a split-second of time; a fighter,

too, who had a mule's kick in even a short-arm blow. His great chance, Knock Out decided, was to carry the fight to Barry, fast and all the time; take a lick to give a crack, and keep weaving and bobbing. This he did to the consternation of Bologny who was staring pop eyed from Barry's corner.

Knock Out was here, there, and everywhere, and Barry was hitting him two blows to his one, but Barry wasn't doing any damage. Knock Out's head was lowered, so that his jaw was laid against a shoulder, and his head danced from side to side with remarkable rapidity.

"Into his rations, Barry!" yelled Bologny. "Step in when he comes like that, and give him leather biscuits for his lunch!" Barry heard a part of that cry, and acted on it. He stopped Knock Out with a pair of blows slightly above the pit of his stomach. "That hurt 'im!" screamed Bologny. "Deliver another load. That guy's wantin' lots of them things!"

On the heels of Bologny's advice came a bellow from the crowd which distracted Barry. The next second Knock Out's fist connected with Barry's left elbow as it tried to block a blow. A pain shot up Barry's arm and his glove dropped to his side. Knock Out knew what that meant, and as a wolf leaps forward, then turns in the air to slash at a prey's side, so Knock Out sprang for Barry's head, side-stepped and crashed right and left against the unguarded left side of Barry's head; but the blows were high. Yet they hurt and they weakened. Barry fell into a clinch just as the bell sounded for the first round. Neither man was perspiring.

On the way to his corner the shock-numbed left arm of Barry came to life again. Bologny grabbed him and began fanning him with a towel. "What was it?" he asked. "I thought you was gone."

"Cracked my funny bone, and near drove it into my eyeteeth. Now that he finds he can hurt me there, he'll drive a try for it whenever he can."

"The next time he does that, uppercut with your right."

"Are you crazy? He'll massacre me."

"Do what I tell you. Ain't I fought him? He's got a single-track mind, and right now all he's thinking of is to make you block his leads and when you do to play for that sensitive spot, so's to weaken your left. When he does that, help him along. Block some more, don't let him get wise. Then he'll try that fancy and fool side step and you'll upper cut him and sky-rocket his head to that top trapeeze. Here's the bell!"

KNOCK OUT came to the center smiling and confident.

"Hurt you, kid, eh?" he said. "Wait'll this one's over."

One, two, three, short lefts crashed into Knock Out's face and a right bedded down under his heart. Knock Out grunted, and the smile left his lips. He led, and Barry blocked—blocked clumsily and a bit slow; but blocked, nevertheless, with the tip of his elbow out. Knock Out tried to hurt that arm, but his blow glanced. Once more came the same try; and this time Knock Out did pull that fancy and fool side step. Barry thought of Bologny's advice and started an uppercut which found Knock Out's nose, and eye. Blood poured from Swasey's face, and the sight of it brought out a cry, as from wild animals, from the throats of the audience.

Barry followed up his advantage. He hit Knock Out twice in the middle and once under the heart. Then Knock Out led, and Barry blocked. And as he caught the lead of his opponent on a forearm Knock Out side-stepped and crashed a stunning blow almost back of Barry's ear. Barry was off balance, going forward, and that blow sent him sprawling full length to the canvas. The bawl of the spectators drowned out all hearing. Barry fell face down in his own corner where Bologny's head came almost to his own.

"Aw, kid," said Bologny, "for the love of Mike! Get up! Don't let him do this to you." Barry smiled.

"Act crazy," he said. "I ain't hurt. He caught me with only one heel on the mat, and clipped me to the canvas. When I get up he'll think I'm caving in like a mud house and I'll take him to the cleaners."

Bologny yelled, waved his hands, Barry's head dropped flat, as Curly started the time. The tent stilled. Curly went on with the count. "One! Two! Three! Four! Five!" and here Barry stirred. Six!" he arose to one knee. "Seven!" Knock Out started toward him. "Eight!" Barry was on his feet and Knock Out was after him like a fury. Even the cowboys from Belle Fourche

were yelling for Knock Out to finish it. The blood lust of that crowd wanted to "see a kill." But Barry stilled the mob. He turned, coming out of a corner, side stepped, crouched, reached in with a long swinging left hand and caught Knock Out's right in and under its arm pit. The thud of that blow sounded far and loud under the shadowy canvas. Knock Out's jaw dropped, his heart seemed to swell, to miss, to gush and then to sputter. He blanched as he wrapped his arms about Barry and pressed his head close to Barry's ear.

"I heard what you told Mose Tinkam this afternoon," he cried, "and you'll hear about that. I know Smoke Malone. He wanted to fight me last year. If you're with this show when we get to Salida, I'm going to have you killed."

Like a demon Barry flung him off, broke those gripping arms and flung Knock Out's body away as if it had been jerked across the ring on ropes; then he pursued it. And with hands working like pistons, first to the chin, then to the midriff, back to the face, up to the heart, and down to the pit of the stomach, he allowed Knock Out no time to get set either for offense or defense. Barry was throwing himself wide open; at last he knew what Bologny had tried to teach him. This was the way to beat this bimbo. Take a lick to give a haymaker. Of a sudden his fist shot under the short ribs as Knock Out gasped and filled his lungs. That wicked blow coming on that inflated body sent a skilling vibration up to the heart. The man seemed stifled and starving for air.

And to get that infinitesimal bit of wind which Knock Out's body hungered for he lifted his chin. Barry saw it coming up out of that mass of shoulder muscles.

Saw it tilt, grow loose, as the jaw dropped and the mouth gaped for an intake. Then Barry's right started up and across—a streak of white and tan. His glove hid Knock Out's mouth for a split-second as the grate of bone crunching bone sounded sickeningly. That was all there was to the fight. Barry's right had landed on the button.

Knock Out's knees sagged, and as a sack upsets and falls he slipped to the floor an inert mass of flesh.

Curly Tarleton stood over him lifting and lowering his hand in a dolorous motion which was punctuated with a voice counting off the seconds. At the stroke of ten Curly grasped Barry's right hand and raised it high.

"Champeen Middleweight Circus Fighter of the world!" he screeched. "He knocked the former champeen kicking in fifteen seconds less'n two rounds. He'll be back next year to take on all comers. This man is my fighter, boys, from this on out. Knock Out Swasey goes back to the pavements. He ain't hard enough for the sawdust."

Knock Out sat up. He had heard what Curly had announced. He arose, started for Barry, then changed his mind. But he gave Barry a malevolent look which should have informed the cowboy, right then and there, that Destiny had snarled him when she had pitted him against Swasey.

It was some time before Barry could escape the adulation of the stockmen and rodeo hands; when he did he sought Bologny and with him walked to his dressing tent. The fight held no compensation for Barry. What Knock Out had threatened distressed him.

Chapter IV

EASY-GOING SMITH

THE circus continued on its way. Barry was its idol, and many times every day Bologny related how he had found and taught the new champ. Knock Out Swasey drew his pay in Pierre and vanished. No one saw him go, and he told no member of the circus what his destination was to be. Across Montana, into Wyoming, through Colorado and into New Mexico went Curly's aggregation for the greatest season he had ever had. Barry was taking championships at bronc shows along the way, for the summer was late and the rodeos were many. This gave the circus column after column of free publicity and worked up fine gates. And Curly was generous to Barry, giving him bonuses from time to time. So pleased had he been at his defeat of Knock Out Swasey that the money was split. Barry's share was about twelve hundred dollars.

For the first time in his life Barry had a good-sized roll. They reached Salida in the gray dawn of a September day.

Barry walked out of the sleeping car with Bologny and stared about him. To

the east the gaunt hills. Colors were everywhere. Barry took a long breath of the exhilirating air.

"Great," he thought, "no wonder Larry loved it so. Here's where I'd like to settle down."

"I seen you," said Bologny, a strange affection in his voice, "stick your rod into your pants, under your vest, when you left your berth. Are you getting ready to spray somebody, Barry?"

"Bologny, my twin brother was killed by some skunk who lives around here. I don't want him or his gang catching me without something to shoot with. I'm leaving this show here after tonight. I've had my talk with Curly and he agreed to say something in the papers about how sorry he is to lose me. And he's helping me a lot, besides doing me a good turn by giving out my name as Barry Head. I want to stay here and get the low-down on the killers of my brother. I don't intend to waylay and butcher up nobody. I figure on gum-shoeing around, getting the evidence, and then let the old law in Kansas City take its course. If the gang knew who I was I'd be salivated before I knew I was hit."

"That being the police record in this yere case, Judge, gimme thirty days, too. I'm going to stick with you."

"Bologny, you're full of fleas. What'd you do in a country like this? Look around you, old podner. There's nothing but lonesomeness in these hills; and nothing but sand in that desert. If you don't love the bawl of a bull, the whimper of a little brockle-faced calf, and the smell of sweat and leather, you ain't got business getting heart break in a broke-up country like this."

"Now, me, Barry, I'd see a bunch of cows like that, and maybe think they was buffalo. And I gets sore in the back of my lap riding any man's saddle; and sand and sunsets ain't like paradise to me; but, boy, I ain't goin' to beat it off an' leave you run your fool carcass into no graveyard."

Out flew Barry's hand. He couldn't talk. All he could do was to pump Bologny's arm.

ONE of the weight-lifting ladies of the circus, who was also used as foundation figure for the human pyramid act, came up at this instant. Big she was, but tender hearted as a girl. She had heard partly and guessed about all Bologny had said, and to conceal her own softness she blurted, "What's the matter with you two bozos?" Drunk this early in the morning? Say, don't stand there pumping hands, look about you! There's a sunrise coming off, around here, and it's running four feet to the yard in strong-for-beauty stuff. Gee, Barry, Bologny ain't the only one who hates to see you leave him."

"Say, Battle Ax, I ain't quitting Barry. I'm going to be a cowboy. Me and him is going to flatten out all them knobs, out there, and make a lake outa that desert. I'm quiting the show here and joining up with it when you open."

The Amazon passed on, giving a series of little pats to Barry's shoulder as she walked away.

Bologny and Barry walked from the railroad yards to the business section of the town. There was no one in the street. The children and a few early risers were down at the yards watching the handlers and wagon men unloading the cars. Barry stared about him. Across the street was a garish sign. He read it and smiled as he repeated it, aloud, to Bologny. LIVE AND LET LIVE SALOON. WE AIN'T CLOSED IN THIRTY YEARS.

"I'll bet you're as safe in there as if you were in a lion's cage," remarked Bologny. "There's another sign, bo, read that one!"

Barry read, "THE OLD OAKEN BUCKET.

"Huh," he said, "let's go in and see how hot their beer is."

As they stepped through a door, an oldish man, unseen before, popped up from back of the bar. He stared, eyes dilated, at Barry. Then he moved along the bar, watching as he walked every move Barry made. When Bologny ordered two glasses of beer the old man said in a highly-pitched voice, "Glasses of beer we ain't got. Bottles is what we serve. Two bits a bottle, and it's all wet down to the last drop. If you drinks it fast, it seems cool." Then he grinned.

"Two bottles," answered Barry, "don't pay no attention to my buddy, he's a teetotaler and ain't used to nothing but orange juice and fig syrup. Have a drink your ownself."

The bottles were jerked up from somewhere, and popped down on the bar. The old man poured himself a huge drink of whiskey.

"Son," he said, poising his glass, "I had the skeer of my life when you walked in here. I thought you was a dead man."

BOLOGNY jerked a glance toward Barry.

"One of the railroad men said the same thing, last night," replied Barry. "Who was the fellow masquerading round as me? He might run into some of my bills sometime."

"This say-loon," began the old man, "is headquarters for the L Standing Bar outfit, west of here. The one across the street, The Live And Let Live dump, is just the opposite, only more so. Working for that L Standing Bar was a fellow by the name of Larry Shane. A whiter man never put on a hat, no, nor, slipped a leg over a salty bronc. The Lord wanted him to ride herd on sinners, so he sent him a hurry call to make the next round-up. Larry was murdered in Kansas City, a few months back, and this town's been like a powder-house ever since. You look as much like Larry as one pinto bean looks like another. What's your name?"

"Barry Head. I'm leaving the circus here and getting me a job, riding for some outfit."

"Larry? Larry?" repeated the old man, intoning his voice in a querying manner, "and yours is Barry. I never heard of such a thing. Where you from?"

"Texas. Way down south in Texas, too. Where you can smell the gulf air."

Then Bologny, thrilled at the reception Barry was getting, filled with a seething excitation because of what Barry had confided to him, expecting any instant to hear the old man accuse his friend of being Larry's brother, he launched into a wild boasting about Barry's ability to ride and what medals and prizes he had won at bronc shows since leaving Dakota.

"He's got a car end full of them leather trophies," he went on. "But wait till you see him in the ring tonight. He fights with us. Takes on everybody and anybody. Bars nobody."

"You did last year," remarked the old saloon man. "I remember there was almost a lot of trouble. But, son, don't you fight the man they've got to put up against you tonight. He ain't human. And he ain't wolf. He's just a cross between a crocodile and a gorilla. But he's going to make another try."

"What's his name?" asked Barry.

SMOKE MALONE. He'll be in town in a little while, and his gang will come with him. Likewise the L Standing Bar outfit will be riding this way. You see, this Larry I was telling you about, some folks think the boys of the B Bar NT salivated him. We're afraid when both gangs gets licker into 'em shooting will take place. They've sent to Albuquerque for some special policemen to keep the peace; but if either of them crews craves to smell powder them policemen better be sitting in some back room playing sluff."

"This will be my last fight," smiled Barry, "and I won't bar any man. I wouldn't like to ride in this country if I refused to fight this Smoke Malone. But, say, that L Standing Bar spread you talk about sounds good. I wonder could you fix it to have me get to see the hiring-boss of that outfit?"

"I'll see the owner, Jack Tilton, as soon as he comes to town. He was crazy stuck on Larry Shane, and if he sees you I'm layin' a bet he'll want you around his place if you don't do nothing but pull water out of the well. Pardner watch your step around this town. The sight of you on the street is liable to get somebody killed, including your own-self. Have another drink?"

"Nope," said Barry, "I reckon we'll go get us some T-bone steak with a pair of sunny-side eggs on top for garnishment. What might your name be?"

"They calls me Easy-going Smith, because I ain't nothing else than just opposite to that. Drop in anytime, you boys."

"I'm going to stay around here with Barry," exploded Bologny. "Does you reckon you need a bartender? I can mix anything that's fluid, and my trade is fighting. But with my knuckles and fists. I don't mind biting an ear, or maybe gouging an eye, or butting, or using a pair of dusters; but the thought of a gun gets me all cholera marbles. I'd work cheap. I kinda like this air and the scenery."

"Is you sober?"

"Not afflicted with it; but if I went to work for you I wouldn't play it for a steady game, that is, I wouldn't be more'n half-drunk, all the time. I wants to be kinda frank with you."

"Come to see me tomorrow. You've hired out. Wages ten a week, all you can eat and drink and no Sundays or any days what follow or go before Sunday does you get off. I pays for a week's work and daggone me I gets it. You and me'll get along as slick as butter rolling off a calf's snoot. What's your name?"

"Bologny, they calls me. But Gault Shepperd is my right name."

"Goshamighty, I like Bologny better. Nobody goes by a *right* name out here. Them things is like the weddings, some of us have acquired, from time to time, we're trying to forget about 'em. Bologny, have a drink."

"No sir, Barry's getting ready to move. I'll report to you tomorrow morning. How about aprons? Does I have to furnish my own linen?"

"Linen? Why, you rannihan! Get yourself a pair of boots, strap on your spurs, and walk in here with overalls on. Linen? Say, what do you think we do in The Old Oaken Bucket, sell talcum powder?"

"I'll fix him up," said Barry. "He'll look like Kit Carson when he walks up in the morning. Good-by, Easy-going, come to the show tonight. I'll send you down some passes. How many do you want?" Barry felt stifled. He wanted to get into the air.

"Just one. The only thing I herds with is a horse. And I've never been able to teach that son of a gun to sit in a chair. But I ain't give up yet, he's only eighteen next April."

Into the street strode Barry and Bologny. And as they went to a cafe Barry repeated mentally the very last words of Mose Tinkham, *"Tell Barry to take them spurs to Easy-going Smith."*

Like a voice from the dead another thing entered his mind. It was the poem he had now completely memorized.

All alone on the hillside—
Larry and Barry and me.
Flat on our bellies, and pouring in lead,
Seven rounds left, and the horses dead.

Chapter V

BARRY SEES SMOKE

SALIDA was too small for more than one show and so this was given at night. The whole country always turned out for a circus. Tarleton's was a counter irritant to the region because of its wild west feature which the real cattlemen of the country regarded as a joke; hence they came in droves to see their boys outride the "circus hands" as the performers in this feature were called.

The last visit of the show, which had nearly resulted in a fight between the cowboys and circus men, had occasioned a tremendous interest in the present occasion. Salida filled up early, and the town hummed. Barry, under a promise given to Curly, had retired to his car where he played cards with two of the clowns. Curly had seen somebody, Barry did not learn who, and a request had been made to keep the boy off the streets to avoid trouble.

At two o'clock, however, Curly returned bringing a tall, lithe, grisled rancher with him. Curly motioned Barry to come into his car and Barry followed his boss. As the door to the owner's coach closed Curly introduced his visitor.

"Barry, this is Jack Tilton, of the L Standing Bar ranch who wants a word or two with you. Easy-going Smith hunted me up, just after you had been into his place, and asked me to keep you out of town. Now comes this gent and wants a confab with you. Take the car, I'm going outside." Curly walked from the coach.

"So you're Barry?" said Jack Tilton, obviously astounded by what he saw. "Barry Head? Easy-going said you looked like him; but I wouldn't have believed it."

"I'm Barry Shane, Mister Tilton, brother of Larry, and I'm down in this sand to get a line on who killed my brother."

"You better go on home. We'll look after the killer. All you'll do out here is get bush-whacked. With this dirty nest of crooks an honest man hasn't got a chance. Who knows who you are?"

"Curly Tarleton and Bologny, an old circus hand who is leaving the circus with me at Salida. Bologny's to work for Easy-going Smith. Look here, Mister Tilton—"

"Jack's my name. Don't you mister me, Barry."

"Jack she is. But look at this. Did you ever see that thing before?" Barry drew out the buckskin bag containing the rowel he had picked up at the scene of Larry's homicide.

"That's the missing rowel from

Henry Josse's spurs!" cried Tilton, taking the steel and silver wheel in a hand. "Where did you get this thing?" Then Barry told him and also narrated his meeting with Mose Tinkham, the bulldogger and the last words of Mose.

FOR a while Jack Tilton stared out of the window.

"Boy, there were ten of Big Nate Towers's men besides himself who were in K.C. the day Larry was killed. Most of those men rode horses around the yards helping the company riders pen up the train load of beef Nate had delivered. Any one of these boys might have worn that pair of spurs. How did Mose fasten the killing on Smoke Malone?"

"He didn't try to do that. All he said was that he picked up Smoke's spur in his room and in front of Big Nate Towers smiled as though he knew something. When he got back home he figured that Nate and Smoke feared him for what he knew of them spurs. Smoke was out of the hotel at the time Larry was killed, though the Chief of Police of Kay See told me all the B Bar NT boys had an iron-clad alibi. What do you suppose Larry discovered that led him to identify the cows Towers was unloading as belonging in part to you?"

"What are you talking about? I never heard anything about that phase of it, before."

"Didn't your men tell you? I mean those fellows who were with Larry in Kansas City?"

"Not a word. Larry must have been alone, I reckon, when the B Bar NT train pulled in. Who told you of that?"

"The Chief of Police. He said Larry identified the cows in front of a cattle buyer, and said what he had to say loud enough so that Towers's men heard him. There was a near fight at that time and Larry walked away. Jack, my brother was a cowman. And he never said a cow was one man's, when it belonged to another. If he was in doubt he'd keep his mouth shut. But he knew brands and strains, and I never saw his beat for knowing broncs and steers once he had them fixed in his mind. Do you think Nate Towers is stealing your calf crop?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe he's changing your brand into his."

"Are you a cowboy and suggesting that? How would you get the L Standing Bar into the B Bar NT?"

"I don't know. But I know Larry, and he didn't recognize no cows from snoots, horns or hoofs. He got a look at a hide, and I'll bet there's brand blotting going on down there. I want a riding job for you. A stray-man job. Can I have it?"

"Not if you're going to get killed."

"I want to work alone, comb the country, come and go, when I like, and get wise to what's going on down here. Write your ticket for wages; but if you'll tell me where you want your cows to feed I can keep the various bunches on the right grass and earn my fare in this way. And then I'll get what I want, in between times. Is it a go?"

"Yes, shake. I'll give you seventy-five a month."

"Thanks. Now one thing more. What does Easy-going Smith know of them spurs of Henry Josse's? And is Easy-going safe to confide in?"

"I don't know what he knows; but I know what he'll do, when he's riled. He'll walk right up and spit in any man's eye and never quiver a shake. Larry liked Easy-going, and Easy-going liked him. What you going to do with this rowel?"

I WANT you to look after that. Take care of it, will you? I had duplicates made, and these I wear in my spurs. Had I better ride in them things tonight?"

"Are you going to ride tonight?"

"Yes. Curly bought some snappy broncs from Verne Elliott, coming through Johnstown, Colorado, the other day, and he paid for them to give these hands here a tough ride. One of these horses is a real outlaw. Rocking Chair is his name. There's another called Fadeaway and a third called Trouble Enough. Each of these horses is plenty sour to set the ordinary run of bronc peeler on his ear before he gets to thinking he's in the saddle. Curly is laying for the B Bar NT boys and wants to make monkeys of them in front of their own people."

"Are you going to ride one of these outlaws?"

"I'm to ride the ones that spill the Tower's buckaroos. And I'm going to ride with a black mask covering my face;

but I'll be announced as *Barry Head, the fighting cowboy.* I understand Smoke Malone has challenged the Tarleton fight champ. I'm going to battle him, Jack. And if I do I'll be able to see what I want to see in his eye. If he killed Larry it'll show in the first squint he takes of me when I step into the ring and pull off my mask and he sees I'm a dead ringer for Larry. I don't care how big or how fast his gait is, he's my meat. I feel that in my bones."

"Nothing can stop you fighting?"

"No. I want to go through with this thing. Jack, something's working me toward a center in this killing. Just before I got your wire telling me of Larry's death, I was reading these verses in the bunkhouse. "Listen to 'em." Barry recited: "The Grey Horse Troop." Jack Tilton's eyes were misty when Barry ended.

"Then I went to K.C., found that rowel. After I planted Larry I joined-up with this circus, run onto Mose, who wised me up to Towers and Smoke, come on here and bumped into Easy-going the first thing, and then learned that Smoke Malone craves to meet me in the ring. What made a fighter out of me? What made me whip Knock Out Swasey? What is shoving me on all the time, from one link in this chain to another? Think of them verses."

"All right, I'm with you. But don't you be fool enough to wear those spurs in the ring tonight. Don't tip off your hand, before it's played. I'll stick this rowel in my bank and you put your spurs away, some place. Now I have to leave you. My boys have had a hunch all the time that Larry was jobbed by Smoke or Big Nate, and if they get full of red-eye and bump into any of the boys from the B Bar NT they'll begin busting caps.

"I want to get things all set, so I can stop trouble on the street or in the circus, if it starts. I've a lot of friends in town, and I think we outnumber Nate's boys. I'll stay at the hotel tonight. So come to see me in the morning, and I'll drive you out to my spread. Remember, don't do anything foolish, tonight."

THE main show was over. The after-performance was about to begin. This started with the wild west show and wound up with the three-round boxing match.

The town authorities, in conjunction with Big Nate Towers and Jack Tilton, made the L Standing Bar and the B Bar NT boys check their guns as they had entered the circus tent. Now, each outfit occupying a tier of seats, they sat opposite each other, in a sort of malignant truce.

Curly Tarleton's ringmaster announced that this year the trained mule Electricity had been side tracked. Salida cowboys were too tough for Electricity; but the Great Tarleton had brought along three bucking horses, and twenty-five dollars would go to anybody not connected with the show, who could ride any one of these. A roar went up from the B Bar NT section. Handlers led out Fadeaway, a gunny-sack about his eyes as a blind, a hackamore over his head.

"Who's first to ride Fadeaway?" yelled the ringmaster. A B Bar NT cowboy jumped into the ring. A companion helped him saddle the bucker.

"Are you ready?" screeched the ringmaster. The cowboy, who had eased himself into the saddle, nodded that he was. The blind was jerked away, the men holding Fadeaway's head jumped aside. For an instant the great sorrel stood immobile; then, as the boy on his back jammed home a spur, Fadeaway unwound. And the way he slashed and leaped, threw himself and hit the track in a humped-up bunch caused a gasp to come from the spectators. Half-way down the ring the boy left his back in a wide circular flight, landed on his head and lay still. His friends ran to him and carried him to a water bucket where he was revived.

"Next rider," yelled the ringmaster, "Rocking Chair is the name of this horse. Send over a good cowboy. Fadeaway is to Rocking Chair about what Little Tom Thumb would be to Jesse James. Let's have a top-hand, now."

A tall, powerfully built cowboy arose and ambled with a saddlehelper into the ring where circus men were holding Rocking Chair. This boy almost cut Rocking Chair in two with the cinch; but the circus men said nothing. Rocking Chair had plenty wind, and he always swelled out and fought the cinch as he was saddled. Barry, looking out from clown-alley, smiled as he saw the rider trying to cheat, even before he began his ride.

"Who is that hand?" he asked of

Easy-going Smith, who was standing at his left.

"That's Smoke Malone's side kicker, Half Mad Moore. He's the most even-tempered fellow in the state, half mad, all the time. But, boy, he's a rider!"

"Rocking Chair's a horse" commented Barry. "Yowee! there he goes!" And how the outlaw bronc tuned on! Straight up in the air he leaped, twisted like a corkscrew and hit the saw-dust. Half Mad Moore nearly lost his seat, and started to grab the horn. A groan went up from the B Bar NT boys, and a huzza from the L Standing Bar men.

UP REARED Rocking Chair the second time, and down he came, head between his knees, gaining some of the hackamore rein held by Half Mad, thus obtaining a decided advantage. Then he jumped, lit, sideswiped, jumped again, sun-fished twice, swung about and spun around. Three times he went into the air with a shocking leap and three times when he landed Half Mad's head snapped onto his chest. At the fourth attempt the rider catapaulted from the saddle and struck the earth on a shoulder.

"Get ready your next rider!" bellowed the ringmaster. "Here comes Trouble Enough! Send out your best boy. We don't want to give these good people a cheating with this performance. Trouble Enough is a bucking horse. Those other two buckers were just trained goats. Give us a man, won't you?"

"Who's that?" muttered Barry, as a tall, monstrous-looking man arose from the center of the B Bar NT crowd.

"Smoke Malone," whispered Easy-going. "And he's mad. Look at him." Barry jumped past Easy-going. Barry was dressed as a cowboy and wore chaps. Under the brim of his wide Stetson a black mask entirely hid his face. He reached the side of Trouble Enough as Smoke Malone and a helper approached the blinded bucker. Smoke stared at him.

"Whatta you want?" he snarled.

"I'm here to see you don't try to cut this bronc in two with that cinch like that big hunk of cheese did on that last ride."

"I suppose you aim to ride one of these babies."

"When you're done I'll try to ride any one of the three."

"Who are you?"

"Barry Head. I think you and I will meet in that resin-patch, after this part of the show. I hope you don't let this bronc kill you. I want to knock you into the middle of next week. Save yourself for me, cowboy."

Smoke snarled and began to saddle. A murmur ran over the bleachers. The sight of Barry's eyes staring out of the mask was portentous. Barry jumped back as Smoke stepped into a stirrup and gentled a seat in the saddle. He nodded and off came the blindfold.

Trouble Enough was a combination of spinner and flat-foot bucker who had a gift of unloading a saddle and getting himself a cowboy before the boy got set to handle himself; but Smoke stuck past the first stage. Then Trouble Enough loosed a whole bagful of sky-rocketing tricks. He spun, head to tail, in a series of heart-breaking jerks. Smoke lost his hat the third time around; yet he clung and rode slick. Up came the bronc, and down he landed on a spot a good sized hat would cover. Hardly had Smoke readjusted his poise to this shock when Trouble Enough reared, spun on one hind leg, then fell stiff-legged to his fore feet, his hind legs shot straight out and up, and down went his head.

Smoke Malone left that saddle as if he had been yanked out of it on the end of a lass-rope; and as he lit, sitting, he waved a hand and a silly grin spread over his face. The tent was stilled; then a mighty roar went up, and one of the handlers caught Trouble Enough as one would a child's pony and led the great animal back past the stands.

SMOKE picked up his hat, and waved to the crowd for silence.

"This masked marvel, standing over there like the court house burning down, I means that gazebo with the mask, says he'll ride ary one of the last three horses. I picks Trouble Enough bronc. Let's see how much cowboy is under that Fourth of July outfit this circus fighter is wearing. Ride that bronc, bo."

The blind was placed over Trouble Enough's eyes, Barry threw on his own saddle, mounted and signaled for the ride. The sack was jerked away, and Trouble Enough started. This time he meant to get his man at the very start. But at the first jump he felt a burning fire along his ribs and in his shoulders. Barry was giving him the steel of his

spurs, and riding all over him. Trouble Enough bawled with surprise and started to whirl. He came up, whirled, felt the spurs clip his flank, bawled in a series of furious cries and tore away in a zig-zag manner which jerked the crowd to its feet. Yet Barry rode. And if the bronc had given an exhibition with Smoke Malone now Trouble Enough was making that ride look like a burro's work. Still Barry stuck.

And in that downpour of illumination from the top and pole lights Barry's black spurs substituted for his silver pair, glinted like streaks of fiery obsidian. And all the time Barry smiled and held a free hand aloft.

"Bawrrr! Bawrrr! Bawrrr! Bawrrr! Bawrrr! Bawrrr!"

The anger cry of that furious bucking horse sounded in the tent like the roar of some predatory beast. From the far end of the track, where Trouble Enough had raced, there came the cries of the cowboy.

"Hi! Yiiiiiiii! Hi! Yiiiiiiii! Whoooopeeeiiiii!"

A gust of cheering voices drowned out that ringing whoop as the audience saw Trouble Enough swing around the track and start back to the reserved seats. At every leap he seemed to slow. He was wild-eyed, frothy at the mouth, and sweat-flecked as he passed the section of the L Standing Bar. Then he quit. Head down, lungs heaving and flanks pumping; and stood straddle-legged as Barry dismounted and patted him on the shoulder.

Barry lifted his hat to the crowd and raced past Easy-going into the dressing rooms back of the main exit. The ringmaster yelled through the megaphone.

"He's a cowboy, ain't he, folks? The next event will see Barry Head fight Smoke Malone. And there all of you will get a look at Barry's face. Last year Smoke Malone had my fighter bluffed but watch him when he gets a look at this one. Get ready, Malone, we start this fight right now."

Chapter VI

Fate's Dead-Fall

SMOKE MALONE came into the ring nude, save for a pair of short trunks, rolled socks and athletic shoes. He caused a loud outburst as the crowd saw his hairy body and its muscular development. Barry's skin, smooth, healthy-looking, and pink, gave a contrast to the spectators which made them pity the boy.

Curly Tarleton introduced them, gave them instructions and the fight was on. Up to this instant Barry had worn his mask. As the bell sounded he jerked it off, his back turned to Smoke, and tossed it to Bologny. He faced about to meet the bearlike rush of Smoke Malone. And as he did so grinned.

Something happened to Smoke as he caught sight of Barry's features. He seemed to wilt. His eyes popped, and a throbbing became visible in his bearish throat.

'I thought a look at this face would get you, Smoke," Barry flung at him, just as they went into a clinch after an exchange of light lefts to the head.

"Who are you?"

"You ought to know. I'm Barry Shane, brother of Larry, and I've come out here to get you. In this ring I intend to beat out of you what I want."

Smoke flung him off and lunged at him; Barry side stepped and sent a vicious right to Smoke's ribs which sounded like a bung-starter hitting the top of a barrel. Quickly Barry shot over a left that opened a cut over Smoke's eye covering his face with a red smear as Barry's gloves soddenly smacked it, time and again.

"What's wrong with Smoke?" one of his friends yelled. "He ain't got no flash. Look at his legs. Has that boy hurt him that much?"

Smoke was staggering about the ring as though punch-drunk. He roused, shook his head, and bored into Barry furiously; but the sally expired almost as soon as born. He looked frightened, stared about, once or twice, toward the tier of seats where his comrades were, then swung awkwardly and futilely at Barry. Barry pounded him against the ropes, where Smoke dropped into a clinch.

"Get it over with, Kid, quick," he said. "Start a haymaker and let my crowd see it. I'll drop. As soon as you're dressed meet me back of the Live And Let Live Saloon."

"You want to butcher *me* too, eh?" snapped Barry, breaking away. His mind seethed at the obvious trick of this hairy devil before him. He hurled a fury of lashing rights and lefts, hitting Smoke

time after time without a return.

The tent became a bedlam of roars, and cries for Barry to knock Smoke out. Around the ring backed Smoke and after him slashing, chopping, boring in to land and backing away and hitting as he did so, Barry worked Smoke into a corner.

He saw a miserable color wash up under the deep tan of the man's face, he saw craven fear blot out the tigerish look Smoke had worn at the opening of the round. Something was happening inside of Smoke.

BARRY stepped in close, let drive a wicked left, and as it sent back Smoke's head he hit the upraised chin with all the power he had in his right fist. Smoke Malone dropped like a felled ox, and Curly counted him out. The L Standing Bar boys, led by Jack Tilton, Easy-going Smith and some deputies rushed to the ring and escorted Barry to his dressing room. Here Barry dismissed everybody but Easy-going and Bologny. As the door shut Barry picked up one of his spurs from under a bench where he saw it sticking out from beneath an old boot. Pointing to the rowel he gave the spur to Easy-going, and as he did so narrated to him his contact with the bull-dogger Mose Tinkham, and what Mose had told him.

"And just before he died," finished Barry, "Mose sent word to me to show this to you. What do you know, old-timer? I'm Larry Shane's twin brother."

"Jack Tilton told me that a while ago. Well," Easy-going Smith appeared calm; but in reality the sight of that rowel had filled him with a boiling tumult. "Well, this proves to me that Smoke Malone killed your brother. Them spurs, Barry, was given to Henry Josse by the owner of the Dolorez outfit, across the border. And they was like a letter of credit.

"Josse told me that when his cows strayed across into Mexico, all he had to do to get the Mexicans to bring him them cows was to ride over with them spurs or send somebody over wearing 'em with a note to any of them outfits across the line. The boss of the Dolorez Rancho runs all that country, and he sent word to all his people to be on the lookout for them spurs and to give the man wearing 'em the best they had and to charge it to him."

"You figger that Smoke knew that, and needed them rowels to do the dirty work of Nate Towers?"

"I ain't gone that far, yet. Where did you get this rowel?" Barry told him of how he had picked it up near the spot where Larry had been killed.

"I give the rowel I picked up to Jack Tilton. From it I had a pair of duplicates made. One is in your hand, and the other is in this second spur." He stuck a hand into the tray of a small trunk which held his family relics and the best of his apparel. Then he tossed things aside pell mell. An astonished look came into his face.

"It's gone," he said. "I seen it this afternoon, late. Both them spurs was in this room at that time. You suppose that somebody got wise to me having them things?"

"Well, cowboy, Jack Tilton's keeping the real one, and if you don't mind I'll take this one along with me. Something mighty funny about losing just the one spur, I'll say. Where you stopping tonight?" asked Easy-going Smith.

"Bologny and I will find a place. Why?"

"You come up to my place when you get dressed. I don't like the odor of things around this circus. It smells of elephant and gee-raff—but also of bunk. You're going to stay whole until you get out to the L Standing Bar. But if you go prowling around Salida after what you done to Smoke and his gang tonight, I wouldn't give a dime for you as old bones. Hear that mob out there? Well, it's too quiet to suit me. Get dressed, and come up to my place. Come around back and Bologny will let you in. Come on, Bologny, you're starting to work tonight. There's a pack of wild wolves up at The Old Oaken Bucket waiting for me to open. Shall I take this spur with me?"

"Take it along."

BARRY had slipped into his cowboy clothes, vest, boots, chaps, and was just buckling a belt and a gun around him when there came a knock on his door. He opened it to see the weight-lifting and human-pyramid woman known as Battle Ax, standing outside. She glanced about, furtively, then stepped inside the room.

"Barry," she said in a quick undertone, "have you seen Knock Out Swasey around this outfit today or tonight?"

"No, why?"

"As I was dressing, after going through with my act, and you was out riding them bucking horses, I seen a shadow of a man run by my tent. He was hurrying, too. I opened a flap and seen him just high-tailing it for the side show section. There wasn't a soul in sight but him. The canvas men and outside gang were all staring through the slits of the big tent. That fellow come under a light, just as he ducked into the side shows and stared back. I ain't sure, but, Barry, I believe that fellow was Knock Out Swasey. Now what made him run?"

"I dunno," replied Barry, but involuntarily his eyes fell to the disordered tray of his trunk.

"As soon as I could I went out, and seeing you wasn't hurt, I kinda thought I was mistaken; but you know a woman's hunch, Barry; well, mine is for you to watch your step. I seem to feel that Knock Out, if he's down here, has made up his mind to get you."

"Thanks," said Barry. "I'll watch my step. But I'm in among my own kind now, Battle Ax, and I feel sort of like I'm at home. Knock Out won't try anything dirty, if he does the people down there will jerk him to a cottonwood limb."

"Good-by, boy, come back and join the show in March, will you? All us girls like you Barry; you're, plumb-through, a white man," said Battle Ax, as she left the room.

BARRY walked up town his mind in a whirl. But he was alert, and chose a roundabout way to Easy-going's resort. As he passed the alley back of the Live And Let Live Saloon he saw a figure lurking in a shadowy doorway. Then the form advanced upon him. No mistaking that shape, it was Smoke Malone. Barry's heart pounded, as he jerked his gun and sprang back of a cement water tank.

"I'll salivate you, Smoke," he said, "if you don't get back through that door. Now git!" but Smoke stepped forward. Simultaneously a dance hall entrance opened across the street and flooded the scene with a wan light; and into the street stepped four or five men and some women. These stopped and stared as they saw Smoke, hands in the air, standing directly before Barry's gun. Then they heard Smoke say in a loud voice, "Kid, you gotta listen to me. I've got something I gotta tell you. I wanta square myself with you."

Barry replied, viciously. "I don't want no truck with you, Smoke. I'll see you in my own way, and when I do you'll talk plenty. Get into that Live And Let Live joint. And don't monkey with me. I'll bust a cap on you the first time I see you if you try to ambush me again." Smoke darted into the alley door of the saloon. Barry walked ahead to the corner. The men and women on the other side of the street turned into another dance hall. Barry hurried to the rear entrance of the Old Oaken Bucket where Bologny greeted him and led the way to some rooms above the saloon.

Here Barry was telling Bologny of what Battle Ax had told him when there sounded a revolver shot outside, followed by two more. Barry looked through a slit in a window shade and saw men running out of the Live And Let Live Saloon.

"What's come off, you suppose?" asked Bologny.

"Maybe the L Standing Bar and the B Bar NT have mixed," replied Barry. "Go down stairs and tell Easy-going to be on lookout for Knock Out Swasey. Give him a description and ask him to tell the John Laws of this burg to pick up Knock Out. I want to have a talk with him."

"Does you think he stole that spur?"

"Get out of here, Bologny, time's valuable." Bologny vanished down the steps.

As Barry stared from the window into the street he saw a great crowd surrounding the Live And Let Live. It milled and worked, first one way, then another. Now it would shoot around to the alley, then to the front. The saloon was jammed with men and no more could gain admittance. Soon Barry saw Half Mad Moore worm through the jam into the street, and with him were two men, wearing stars and carrying sawed-off shotguns.

WHAT had happened? And why was Half Mad Moore walking along with the deputies? Apparently, he was not a prisoner. He seemed to be in earnest and intense conversation with the peace officers. Just at that instant a bunch of men and women hurried to the sheriffs and Barry recognized one

of the men who had come out of the dance hall when he had sent Smoke Malone back into the Live And Let Live. What the men and women said to Half Mad Moore and the officers sent them scurrying back to the saloon.

The minutes dragged. A hum of voices sounded from below in Easy-going's place, an angry, snarling roar came out of the Live And Let Live; then men scattered, and a bunch of the B Bar NT cowboys raced to a hitch-pole and leaped into saddles. They tore away at furious speed just as Jack Tilton and some of his boys crossed from the Live And Let Live and entered The Old Oaken Bucket.

Easy-going, coming up the stairs two at a time, appeared, as Barry stepped away from the street window.

"What's wrong?" Barry asked, startled by Easy-going's look.

"Boy, you gotta hit hell-for-leather out of this town."

"What's the idea?"

"Smoke Malone has just been shot! He was sitting with his chair tilted ag'in an open alley window in the Live And Let Live saloon. Some men and women have told the sheriff that they heard you threaten Smoke just a minute before, right at the mouth of that alley. The Nate Towers boys are hunting you. They've gone to the circus, and a mob is forming outside to snare you. If you're caught we can't do nothing but bury you."

"Where'll I go? I don't like this running business, especially when I ain't done no wrong."

"Them boys riding to the circus has the gun Smoke was killed with. It was picked up in the alley, about half way down. They claims that gun belonged to you. It has a silver butt-plate on which is carved 'From L. to B.'"

"That's my gun," said Barry. "It was a-laying right along side of them spurs, this afternoon. Whoever got the spur, got the gun. I reckon you're right, Easy-going, I'm jobbed. Can I get me a leg across a bronc, somehow?"

"Yes. Jack Tilton will have a pair of fast ponies here, most any minute now; he's already sent to fetch 'em. When these get in the alley one of Jack's boys will take you the short way to the L Standing Bar. Once there, and you're as safe as if you was in God's pocket. Come down after me. And go quiet."

JACK TILTON met Barry at the rear entrance and introduced him to a young cowboy holding a pair of steel-dust geldings.

"This is Quince Hathaway, Barry, he'll take you home. Bologny has told me about the missing spur and what that woman told you. I'll see the sheriff in the morning, and we'll straighten this thing out. I know you didn't shoot Smoke, and so does Easy-going. Why, you was sitting up stairs when them shots was fired. We all know that. But you can't argue with a blood-thirsty crowd. Crawl into that saddle and ramble out of town."

Quince Hathaway led Barry secretly from Salida, across the flats, and into the scrub timber of a broken, hilly country. The night was beautiful, the sky full of stars, the desert suggesting some gigantic stage upon which myriad lights and shades played magically.

"Cowboy," said Quince, slowing down. "Take your time. We've shook off that lousy town, and from this on we can amble along and take her easy. This is a tangled up country, ain't it?"

"I should say it is. It don't seem like it would be much of a trick for a man to lose a trail in this place."

"Nope, but she sure is pretty. The ugly things down here are hydrophobia polecats and men. That's all that mars it." Then, under his breath, in a soft, tenor voice, Quince sang one of Barry's favorite tunes.

The herder he took three-of-a-kind,
The freighter tried for a ten.
The wagon boss drew one, for a blind,
And the dealer stood pat then.
Oh, the big tin stove was sure red hot,
And it got no cooler when they played that pot.

The song went on. A sinking desolation seemed to press upon Barry. Was he, after all, to be cheated? Why hadn't he listened to Smoke Malone? He recalled the threat Knock Out Swasey had made that last night in Pierre. This, then, was the work of Knock Out. But why? And how?

CHAPTER VII

CLEARING CLOUDS

THREE days later Jack Tilton and Easy-going Smith arrived at Tilton's ranch. They went into consultation with Barry immediately.

Both men seemed occupied with some grave concern. Words were not minced nor wasted.

"She's blue, son," announced Jack Tilton, "but not finished. One of the bunch that saw and heard you and Smoke at the alley, is the County Prosecutor. All of the men and women are respectable. They saw you with a gun, heard you threaten Smoke and saw him dart back into the Live And Let Live. They've worked up a feeling ag'in you. It's savage and plumb raw."

"But I was with Bologny. Don't you remember my lost spur?"

"Yes, that's all right; and we figures that whoever stole that spur got your gun at the same time. The sheriff wired and traced your gun by its number. But why would anybody just steal one spur? that's what gets me."

"I remember, now! The spur I gave Easy-going I picked up from under a bench; the other one was in my trunk tray. The guy who stole my spur and gun must have got frightened away before he finished his search."

"Rats!" interjected Easy-going Smith. "This is all talk. It's *hurry* we want, and lots of it. Now listen, I'm sorta daggoned administrator to Henry Josse's estate. And I was appointed by the court. I'm his principal creditor, too. I get his mail, open and read it. He ain't got no heir, and about the same in assets. But among these last was that pair of spurs. Here they are!"

Barry grasped a pair of beautiful spurs. One rowel was missing; but the other was a counterpart of the rowel he had found in Kansas City. "Go on," he said, "These are sure pretty."

"Here's the spur you gave to me. I aims to take the rowel out of that and stick it in this empty shank, then send you over the Line to see the man who gave these spurs to Josse. I don't believe that fellow knows Josse is dead. See the point?"

"Clear as mud! Lead your ace, Easy-going."

"Bologny has been working, since you left town. And he found out, from the sheriff, who got his information from Half Mad Moore, that Smoke Malone didn't go with that carload of cattle from Salida to K.C. He joined up with the outfit at Vaughn. Smoke had been in Mexico, see?"

"Wearing them spurs, eh?"

"Now you're getting hot. He met Nate Towers at Vaughn and they all went into Kansas City in a bunch. That's how come them spurs in his bag when Mose Tinkham picked up and examined one."

"I gotcha! He drove cattle to some place, shipped to Vaughn, joined Nate Towers and my brother spotted some of the cows Smoke Malone had brought out of Mexico. Easy-going, you've hit it. But how am I to get next to this thing?"

"The other day came a letter for Henry Josse from Señor Adan Del Montiquez, boss of the Dolorez. This showed me, when I read it, that Montiquez did not know Josse was dead. Here's the letter. You take this, wear Henry Josse's spurs, romp over to the Dolorez hacienda and come back with the true story of what Smoke Malone was doing over there, wearing these spurs. How soon can you ramble?"

"Easy-going, you don't believe Henry Josse was killed by Smoke Malone?"

"Barry, Smoke was shot in the back, and the killing wished on you. You never told us, yet, what it was Smoke tried to say to you in that alley. What was it?"

Barry told what Smoke had said.

"If you had let him talk," blurted Easy-going, "you wouldn't be in this jam now. I'm working on a spooky-feeling that Smoke wanted to tell you who killed your brother and somebody shot him to keep his mouth shut. That's why I want you to ride across the border. Get ready, and while you and Quince Hathway are packing your outfit I'll rivet this rowel from your spur, into the shank of Josse's. Them spurs and that letter from Montiquez will be your passports and I think you will get what we're looking for."

"In ten minutes I'll be ready to ride," said Barry.

BARRY rode south all of that day and the next.

In his pocket was the letter from Montiquez, and upon its envelope was a map showing the route to the Dolorez hacienda. On his feet were a dead man's spurs. That night he camped high; for he was riding like a hunted man—sticking to the timber of the ridges.

After six hours sleep he was again in the saddle. Dropping down from the

ridge he came suddenly upon a cattle trail. This struck him as remarkable. Then comprehension came to him. That cow-trail led from the United States, led off the high, juniper-covered hills which ran due south from the region where lay Jack Tilton's ranch. And the tracks in that trail were old; but all of them pointed one way—*south.* "Uh-huh," he said, aloud, "them cows always coming south. And in front of me, some place, is the first water. Now I wonder, if—!"

He stopped abruptly. Not fifteen feet ahead of him appeared a Mexican attired in a rich outfit and sitting a magnificent horse. He took one look at Barry; then wheeled his pony and vanished into the trees.

Barry loosened his carbine and lifted it out of its boot. "Now I'll soon see how daggoned good these spurs are," he mused. He topped a rise, stared into a lovely grass-covered valley. Across this he could see the man he had just met fleeing like the wind toward a group of *adobes.* Suddenly three riders darted across the path of the fleeing horseman. Guns flashed and the racing *vaquero's* hands flew above his head. "Huh," snapped Barry, "now what do you think of that?"

Quickly the trio surrounded the man it had caught and rode with him to the buildings. There another man appeared in a doorway. At the sight of this man the *vaquero* who had accosted Barry leaped his horse directly at right angles and vanished around a corner of the building. He was gone before his captors could fire a shot. Barry watched him as he placed houses and barn between him and his pursuers. The horse the fugitive rode was running away from those following it, two strides to their one. Soon the man was lost among the trees which screened the slope of a hill.

The collection of buildings at which Barry stared, agreed with the description he carried of the Dolorez hacienda. He decided to ride to the ranch at once. Arriving there he was met by the three horsemen.

"Who are you?" greeted one of these. "You wear Señor Josse's spurs. And you come with El Halcón. Talk!"

"I carry a letter to Señor Adan Del Montiquez. That man, El Halcón, if that's his name, met me on the trail and rode away as soon as he saw me. *El Halcón* means hawk, eh?"

"*Si.* Ride to that middle *casa.* Señor Montiquez is there."

IN FIFTEEN minutes Barry had told Montiquez of Henry Josse's murder and much of that which followed it, including the killing of Smoke Malone. Montiquez clapped his hands and a *vaquero* appeared.

"Have you discovered which way *El Halcón* is taking?" he asked.

"*Si.* He rides the high road over the range. He goes to his gang or to his father. If to his father, we may yet cut him off. There is a goat path, señor. And by this we may reach the other side of the range ahead of him."

"Get him!"

"Who is he?" asked Barry.

"He was supposed to be working with this man you call Smoke Malone on my upper ranch. I thought them both employed by Henry Josse, for Smoke Malone wore the identical spurs now on your feet which I had given to Josse. *Now* I know this *El Halcón* was a cow thief. The cattle he pastured on my land did not belong to Henry Josse my friend. Ride, Pancho! Ride and bring back the Hawk! He must be made to talk." Barry stirred.

"I'll go with your boys, señor," he said. "I, too, have an interest in getting this man. My brother, as I told you, was killed by a man who wore these spurs."

"Go, my friend, Pancho and his men will help you."

Up and up a narrow trail, made by the feet of goats, climbed Barry's horse. And where that tiny path ended on the skyline of a ridge Barry took a look below him. In the valley lay a cluster of buildings and in the center of these was a corral and a squat, long building, a *taberna* (tavern, or drinking place.)

"There, señor, is where he will stop," announced Pancho. "And, see! here he comes! There! There is his dust! If we hurry we can drop down to the village and be drinking when he arrives."

"How far away is he?"

"Thirty minutes, by the road. The Hawk is wise, but he does not know our hills. Remember, señor! He is like a snake with a gun. Take no chances."

"Now put away our horses, you boys," said Barry, "and then take seats at a

back table in the *cantina*. I'll attend to this fellow. Keep your faces hidden by your hats, and make no move until I tell you. *Sabe?*"

"*Si*," said Pancho. "We shall watch him, every second."

As Barry rode down the hill there came to him a verse of the song Quince Hathaway had sung riding away from Salida. The ballad had been a favorite of his brother Larry. Now the lines trembled on his lips. How much, it seemed, did the words picture the very adventure he was about to have.

A shag-haired bronc slid off the hill,
Dead-legged, down-headed and spent.
A cowboy broke for the roulette wheel.
And "Seventeened" his last cent.
And the big tin stove was sure red hot,
And it got no cooler, for the trimming
he got.

Then came the *taberna*. Save for a sallow-faced bartender the place was vacant. Barry walked to the bar and was sipping a claret punch, head down, hat covering his face, when there came a clatter of hoofs, then a long curse, the sound of boots smacking the dirt outside, and after this the hurry of heels into the room. A figure strode to the bar. *El Halcón!*

"Where are my boys?" rasped a voice. "And my father?"

Barry felt the sleeve of the arrival brush his arm. He swung about, jerking his gun, and shoved his forty-five into the small lithely-built, well-dressed man at his elbow.

"*El Halcón*," he said, "you are my prisoner! Walk out that door! And keep your hands above your head."

El Halcón's hands flew aloft. His jaw sagged; a fear-stricken look came into his eyes. "Are you a ghost?" he mumbled.

"Make the wrong move and you'll find that I'm very human. Turn around!"

"I saw you at Nate Towers's ranch. You worked for Jack Tilton! I saw you this morning, and, now, here you are, ahead of me! You are not human!" Nevertheless the man swung about as Barry jerked his gun from its sheath. Pablo and his companions hurried across the room to bind and gag the bartender. In a few moments the five men could be seen going up the goat-trail which led to the Dolorez ranch. Arriving there Barry delivered his prisoner to Adan Del Montiquez who proceeded at once to question the man. Barry, dead beat, by reason of his forced ride south, found a bed and, while *El Halcón's* third-degree progressed, he dropped into a deep sleep from which he awoke at sunset.

AND so, said Montiquez, as he and Barry sat at dinner, "that's why Henry Josse was like a son to me. He was my greatest foreman; made the Dolorez Hacienda a paying proposition, and pursued and rescued my daughters and wife after they had been captured by a band of Insurrectos. When he decided to make New Mexico his home I gave him a little money and the spurs you wear. To my men I let it be known that whoever wore those spurs was to receive any courtesies requested. They were to be letters-of-credit for all Henry Josse wanted of me or my men.

"Recently, and out of a clear sky, came a man to me with a photograph of a band of rebels. My wife identified one of the men as the leader of the gang who had kidnapped her and our children. Sitting in a back row of these outlaws I recognized *El Halcón*. You can fancy how easy it was for me to make him talk of Smoke Malone, your brother, Nate Towers, and the evil workings of this gang. It was an easy choice for him to make—talk to me, or go to a Federal jail with that photo as the evidence which would feed him to a firing squad." Barry started to speak.

"Wait," said Montiquez. "See that?" Barry turned and saw a blood-covered portion of a cow's hide. He nodded.

"You cut out a patch with a brand on it, eh? That's Nate Towers's brand," he said.

"And its under side shows the old scars of the Jack Tilton I Standing Bar burn. Well did *El Halcón* tell his story, and while you slept Pablo went to the upper place, found a cow, killed it and brought back this proof. Half Mad Moore is expected here to run off a bunch of Tilton cows which are feeding on my other lands. These I thought were Josse's cows."

"And when The Hawk saw me today he thought I was Half Mad Moore?"

"Yes, that's why he was so close to you. He saw your spurs and had been watching you come up the trail which Smoke Malone and his boys used to drive in their stolen steers. This con-

fession," Montiquez tapped a written statement beside his plate, "will explain all you want to know.

"In it The Hawk has narrated how Nate Towers ran off Tilton cows, mostly unbranded yearlings and two-year-olds, fed them over here, and when they were fat enough drove them to the American railroad, joined up with shipments from Salida in charge of Nate Towers, and thus hid his movements.

"Brands were blotted whenever necessary. This confession tells how. But Half Mad Moore is coming south, perhaps even now is headed this way. With luck, you will run into him. *El Halcón* agrees to go back with you and show you the trail Nate Towers's men always used. Will you ride north tonight?"

"Yes, as soon as I can."

"Good! Pablo and three of my men will ride with you. Everything is ready. *El Halcón* is eager to get across the border and out of the clutches of Mexican law. You will have no trouble with him."

SEÑOR, it seems to me that all my clouds are clearing. With what you have given me I can jail Nate Towers as soon as I get back. *El Halcón* made no statement about the killing of my brother, did he?"

"He knew your brother had been killed. Thought Smoke Malone had done the job. That's why he was so frightened when he met you in the saloon. He thought he was looking at a ghost. Once, many months ago, he had seen your brother riding across the Nate Towers lands. Towers had hailed Larry and introduced The Hawk to him.

"Of his own knowledge he knows nothing of Larry's murder; but he says that if Nate Towers had Smoke Malone killed, Half Mad Moore will avenge that murder. Half Mad Moore and Smoke Malone were like brothers. Now, let us get into the yard. I hear Pablo about the horses. When all the evil days are over for you my young friend, I hope you will return to visit me. My family will be here in a few weeks, and I shall take pleasure in showing you this beautiful country."

"I'll come," said Barry. "I had it figured that I would have to take the law into my own hands and kill Nate Towers with my own gun. But the work you have done today stops all this. We can let the law take its course."

"I'm not so sure," said Montiquez. "When you read the confession you will see that The Hawk believes Nate Towers is getting ready to run away. He aimed to sell this last bunch of Tilton cows and drive down three thousand more head. Half Mad Moore was to have arrived with the plans for the last drive. You must hurry if you want to prevent this."

Barry stuffed the confession in a pocket and arose from the table.

In an hour he and his companions were hurrying into the hills where ran the trail to the B Bar NT outfit.

CHAPTER VIII

JUSTICE SIGHTED

BARRY and his men, riding with The Hawk in their midst, single-footed into the thick, high timber of the ridge.

Miles lay behind them, and now they were in the hills back of which lay Nate Towers's spread.

"Up ahead, but a mile or two," said *El Halcón,* "is the trail to Jack Tilton's ranch. Right here is where we used to "shove" the stolen cattle we drove to the Dolorez outfit. Hear that? What is is?"

"Rifle shots!" answered Barry. "Two of 'em! Get out of sight, and ride in the brush. You come with me *El Halcón!*"

The men went ahead, stealthily, slowly, until they were halted by a sight which a shaft of moonlight revealed through the trees. Directly, at the trail-forks, where paths led to the L Standing Bar and the B Bar NT, they saw on the ground the motionless figure of a man; and nearby, cropping the grass, a saddled horse. Barry sent Pablo ahead to reconnoiter. In a few moments the Dolorez foreman signalled for his companions to approach. Half Mad Moore was revealed in the trail, shot twice through the upper body. Barry revived him. Moore opened his eyes.

"Barry Shane," he gasped, "for God's sake don't let me die before I tell my story in front of witnesses. Nate Towers plugged me, shot me right here."

"Why?"

"I—was—coming south—to arrange for driving—out the last of the cows—we had on the Dolorez ranch. Nate—rode with me—this—far—And right

here—he told me he had killed Larry Shane—and that he had—shot Smoke Malone—to keep Smoke from telling you—Barry. I tried to get him—but he—had his carbine out and plugged me as I reached for my rod—Don't let me die! I want to—squawk—in a court room. Hurry! After killing me—Nate will try for a getaway! Knock Out Swasey stole your gun—and he and Nate tried to stick the Smoke Malone job on you." The man's head fell back.

Barry again revived him with water from a canteen, and then set about plugging the bullet wounds with tampons torn from his shirt. Half Mad Moore seemed to gain strength. His vitality was enormous. His hate was like a tonic to him. "There's chuck wagons just three miles from here," he said, weakly. "Jack Tilton has put on a roundup of his cows on this end of his ranch. Get me over there, quick. I'll ride, and if I can—get in a saddle—I'll last long enough—to talk."

They lifted him tenderly to the back of his horse and held him there as they wound their way toward the L Standing Bar's camps. Day was breaking when they spotted the fires of the wagons. Quince Hathaway detected their approach and rode swiftly to Barry. After hearing of Half Mad's shooting he announced that one of the Tilton men had had broken a leg and a doctor had arrived the night before from Salida and was still in camp.

Half Mad Moore was taken to him at once where he was given attention and where Half Mad made a signed statement of all the crimes he had participated in, and of all that Nate Towers had told him. Barry wanted to ride to town, but Jack Tilton forbade this. Quince Hathaway went instead and carried with him the confession of The Hawk and Half Mad's statement.

Barry was to follow as soon as night fell.

He would meet the prosecutor in his office as soon as he arrived. Jack Tilton and ten of his men would go with him.

BARRY finished his sleep early in the afternoon, but Jack Tilton would not permit the start to town to be made until four o'clock. At nine they entered Salida where they were met by Quince Hathaway who led them to the office of the Prosecuting Attorney.

"Now," said the Attorney for the People, "begin at the beginning. I've got to get it all. This town is nothing but a mob; and while I can't swear that Nate Towers is in Salida, for nobody has seen him, I feel sure that he is. His gang is here and its influence has stirred up the bad element. If you were seen on the street you'd be a dead man, quick. After I talk with you I'll gather up everybody and tell the town what the real facts are. After that we'll pick up Nate Towers and Knock Out Swasey and the rest of this crew."

Barry told all he knew. Then he laid upon the table the rowel he had found back of the feeding-pens in Kansas City. The Prosecutor opened a drawer and brought out a duplicate of this. "That was found the second day after Smoke Malone was killed," he said. "Big Nate and I were walking the alley behind the Live And Let Live Saloon when this thing caught my eye. Now I see that Nate had planted it and wanted me to find it. Maybe he wanted to make it appear that the rowels of Josse's spurs were of some stock pattern and that more than one cowboy owned such things."

"Look inside the center hole of that rowel," said Barry, "where it is axled onto the shank. There's a letter "B" stamped in there."

"How did that get there?" asked the attorney.

"I had the man who made my duplicates place it there so's I could always tell the spur I found from these copies. Now look at this other rowel. There's a "B," too. Them's the copies. Here's the Josse rowel, and it ain't got no letter stamped in it. That proves that the rowel you found in the alley was the one taken from my dressing room. Knock Out Swasey, knowing what went on around our circus stole that rowel, and Big Nate planted it for you to find. When you snare Knock Out he'll squawk his head off, see if he don't."

"These spurs tell their own story. Show them in a court room to one of this county's juries, along with *El Halcón's* and Half Mad Moore's evidence and we'll hang Big Nate pronto. Go on!"

BARRY unwrapped the patch of hide he had brought from the Dolorez ranch. This he laid upon the desk. Then with a pencil made a series of curious marks upon a pad.

"Here's Jack Tilton's brand, the L Standing Bar, made this way, "Big Nate Towers, using a running-iron, changed that "L" and brought up its lower part to form a "U." Then he topped that "U" and it was a box. A swipe through the center of the box, and he had a letter "B." Under that he burnt a lazy bar. The upright bar of Tiltons' brand Nate made into an "N" with two swipes. Two more strokes made the "T" alongside that "N," and the brand was blotted. The L Standing Bar had now become the B Bar NT.

"Holy Smoke!" cried the prosecutor. "A brand-inspector stood no chance detecting this kind of work. What a man needs on Big Tate's cows is a skinning-knife. No wonder Smoke Malone could pass border inspectors with those cows. This Barry, clinches it. Give me that piece of paper and the hide. I'm going down on the street and get all the boys in town to hear me explain this thing. You stay here until I send for you. Come on, Jack Tilton, and the rest of you boys! Barry, don't show your face. Just stay quiet and keep away from the windows."

Ominously, there sounded a hurry of feet in the hall.

The door flew open and in rushed Bologny and Easy-going Smith. "Get out, Barry," cried Easy-going," somebody seen you come into this building and a mob's on its way here to get hold of you for killing Smoke. You ain't got a minute to lose. They've penned up the sheriff and his deputies, and they're half drunk and crazy wild."

"How's the alley?" asked the Prosecutor. "Are they guarding that?"

"No, that's clear, I think."

"All right, Barry, you duck out this door, walk down the hall, open the last door on the left, that's a storeroom, and from there drop onto a shed and into the alley. You, Quince Hathaway, you go with him; and both of you have my authority to shoot your way out in case anybody tries to stop you. Come on, Jack, let's us get down stairs before the boys get here. They'll want to search my offices and that will give Barry and Quince time to get to their horses."

BARRY followed Quince from the room and back of them walked Jack Tilton and the rest of the men. Easy-going waved a hand at Barry as Quince pushed open the storeroom door. Then the low murmur of many voices came to Barry as Quince furtively lifted a window. There was anger and viciousness in that rumble of human tones.

"All clear," said Quince, "you go out, first, I'll be right on top of you."

Barry dropped into the gloom of the alley. Back of him he heard the tramp of many feet sounding through the building he had just vacated. The mob was pouring up the stairs and into the halls where the Prosecuting Attorney had his offices.

"Sssh!" whispered Quince," here I come."

Barry pressed his body against the wall of the shed.

Then Quince brushed his shoulder as he dropped to the earth by his side. "Cowboy," he said, "you stand right here until I come back. Our horses ain't far. I'll get them and then we'll lope down this alley and be on our way."

"All right," answered Barry through dry lips.

Quince stepped away. The hateful darkness swallowed him instantly. Only his muffled tread gave back the sound of his going. Barry loosened his gun in its sheath. Out of the recesses of memory there poured the heat of that long-forgotten poem. It stung him like a lash.

All alone on the hillside,
Larry and Barry and me
Two of us living, and one of us dead—
Shot in the head—and God! how he bled.

His throat swelled.

Inwardly, he cried. "I won't run! It ain't right! I'm going to stay! Stay and fight, and hunt this Big Nate!"

All alone on the hillside,
Larry and Barry and me.

CHAPTER IX

BARRY PAYS THE DEBT

OUT of the wretched gloom where Quince Hathaway had disappeared there broke the sound of a conflict. The scrape of feet, the involuntary exclamations of fighting men came to Barry like a nightmare. Then he heard the thud of bone striking bone. And after this the gloom opened to expose a streak of light—revolver fire!

And it came from the alley's mouth. Once, that stab of fire severed the darkness; twice it bit the gloom; and then a cry followed it. "Stand aside, Knock Out, I'll get him!"

Knock Out?

So that was it! Knock Out Swasey was battling Quince Hathaway, and Knock Out was a trained fighter, cutting Quince to ribbons, there in that abominable gloom; but who was this other man—this man who had sent two bullets down that alley?

"I got him, Nate! Beat it! I've sent him kicking!"

The sound of a falling body struck Barry's ears.

Running feet approached him. He drew his gun, gripped its butt and tried to pierce the darkness, tried to make out the position of Knock Out Swasey who was coming toward him. Then a bulk loomed, loomed ghastly and swift, right before him. Barry swung his gun and its barrel crashed against something hard. Swasey's body hit him as it fell. He knew that his Colt barrel had collided with Swasey's skull. He waited for no more. Racing to the spot where Quince lay he turned the boy over. The movement revived the cowboy.

"Are you all right?" asked Barry. "There was two shots! You ain't hurt?"

"No! He didn't get me; but Nate Towers is out there. Get back, you fool! Out the other end of this alley. I got it on the button, and I heard the birdies sing, quick!"

"Can you get up?"

Quince made the effort, and succeeded. As he arose to his feet Barry whispered to him what he had done to Knock Out.

"Beat it, Barry! I'll slide to the broncs, circle the block, and if I can get to you I'll have our broom-tails at the other end of this alley in a jiffy," said Quince.

"No," said Barry, grimly. "I'm going out of this place into the light, and I'm going to herd Nate Towers into jail. You take care of yourself, Quince, this is my fight.

"All alone? Where do you get that stuff? Now, watch, me! If I can get out of this alley you follow! If he drops me, you beat it out the other end, turn to your left, run back a block and pick out your horse from the hitching-rack." Quince sprang forward. He was weak, but he made a resolute show at running. He reached the dim swath of light which told of the street's illumination.

Then into the middle of this he went. Barry stood as one stricken numb. He couldn't stir, and the movements of his friend appeared like those of some mechanical figure. Ten, fifteen feet Quince Hathaway lurched in his punch-drunk stride, then his shoulders went back, his brain cleared and he strode forward boldly and alert. "He's not in sight," he cried back at Barry, who ran from the alley and joined him.

Together the cowboys walked toward the corner where the lights cast a brilliant glow. Not a human form could they see; but the air was now filled with shouts from men who were crying disappointment from the windows of the building where the Prosecutor had his offices.

"Barry, don't you hear that? They're savage, now that they've lost you! Let's don't go this way."

"I'm going to catch Nate Towers. He's somewhere in that mob, and I'm going to get him. You slip to the corner, I'm going to jump into the middle of the street and get me one swift look." Quince obeyed.

And as he poked his head around the edge of the building he saw a sight which chilled him. A thick huddle of human forms was milling about the building. And every face in that mob was uplifted to a window where a man was shouting that the searchers had failed. "He's beat it!" yelled the man. "He's got out the alley back of here!"

Then, on the far side of the street, all alone, and standing against a post which held up a porch in front of a store, a form moved. Quince recognized the shape as that of Big Nate Towers, and the man's eyes were riveted upon some approaching object. His hand flew to his hip, just as Quince swung his head and saw that Barry Shane had darted into the middle of the street at the intersection of the four corners.

"There he is now!" came the cry of the man at the second-story window. The men forming the mob swung about as though executing a military maneuver. Their eyes flicked first to the body of Barry, standing straddle-legged in the light of the corner lamps, then to the form of Nate Towers.

They saw Nate yank his gun, saw a streak of flame belch from it, even as he drew it from its holster, and they

heard the bark of his heavy forty-five. But there came another detonation; and no man knew whether this was before or after Big Nate's discharge. Barry had fired from his hip.

Nate seemed to swing half around; then he darted back of the post. In this position he fired again, and the crowd made no sound, no movement, as it beheld Barry Shane slowly advance, lifting his gun, slightly, toward the sheltered position of Nate Towers. Big Nate's second shot went wide of its mark. Barry did not fire. The crowd was bewitched at the display of nerve the boy was exhibiting.

Then Big Nate laughed! That raucous and diabolical mirth seemed to send a bolt of hatred throughout every man who heard it. Then they heard Nate cry. "Take that!"

He lifted an arm, then his head appeared, a part of his shoulder, and a slice of his side. Down dropped that arm holding a revolver. A roar sounded from the street where Barry moved. Another followed with unbelievable rapidity. Big Nate's gun did not speak. It dropped to the sidewalk where it clattered and rolled to the street. Nate clutched at the post, slipped to his knees, rolled on a shoulder and fell prone on his back, his head fully extended.

Then Barry saw the Prosecutor, followed by Jack Tilton, Easy-going Smith and Bologny, dart toward the inert form of Towers. The Prosecutor lifted a hand.

"Boys," he yelled, "that's the answer to you fellows! Big Nate's the man who killed Smoke Malone. And he killed Henry Josse and Larry Shane. We have plenty of proof."

BARRY shoved his gun into its holster and stood stock still facing the throng. It would not have dared rush him even if sure of his guilt. After a while Easy-going Smith came to him. Quince Hathaway was already there.

"Are you hurt, Barry?" asked Easy-going.

"No, not a scratch."

"Well, it just had to be, Barry, I reckon. Nate's got three slugs in him and he won't last an hour. There ain't nothing to do now but turn this shooting over to the coroner. The Prosecutor told me to take you out of town."

"Knock Out Swasey is lying back in the alley," said Barry.

"No he ain't," said Quince Hathaway. "I sent two guys to bring him out. Here he comes now."

A roar went up from the mob as it saw the pallid, blood-streaked face of Swasey come into the light of the street.

"Men," cried the Prosecutor, "let that fellow alone. We got to have some sort of jury trial in this case. If you fellows want to take care of all the law down here, why don't you fire me and the judge and save the county some money. Behave now, and let's take this baby to jail!"

A murmur of assent rang through the crowd. Swasey's captors walked him toward the court-house.

Easy-going Smith, Quince Hathaway and Barry started away just as Bologny ran up.

"Kid, you sure done her slick," exclaimed Bologny. "And if ever I seen a set, what oughta been under some big top I seen it when you was standing straddle-legged out there, waiting for that baby to make a move. Take me out with you, Barry, take me out to that daggoned cow-spread and get me away from this lousy town."

"And leave me flat to do all the work in my joint?" cried Easy-going Smith. "Say, Bologny, you agreed to work for me by the month."

"That's all past," grinned Bologny. "I lived forty years a while ago, just waiting for Barry to drop that gazebo. I thought he was never a-going to let his rod talk. No more saloon or circus jobs for me, Easy-going! I've walked down the sawdust trail, and I'm Salvation Sam from this out. I thinks, with a little learning, that I could chambermaid a bunch of cows; don't you think so, Barry?"

"Don't encourage him," shot Easy-going," you'll get him killed in four or five places, all at the same time. But, Lord, how he *can* fill a bottle, and wipe a glass! In time I think, I could make a whiskey hand out of you Bologny."

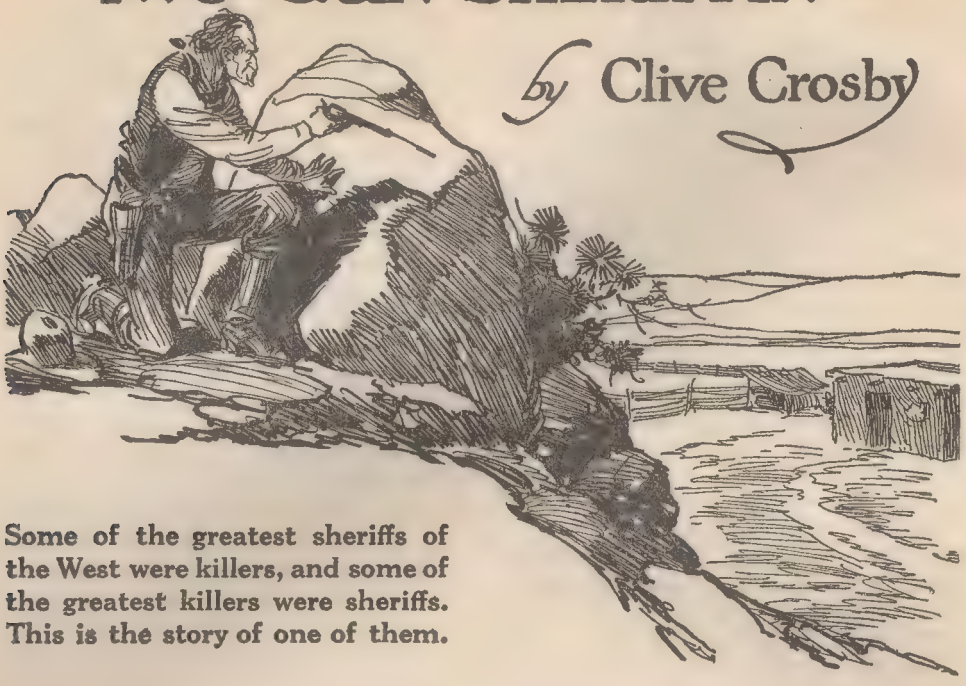
"I don't want to be no whiskey hand. I want a seat in a saddle and a job riding these sands, and nothing heavier on my head than my hat."

The mob swung about. Its members were staring at Barry as he moved away. Then a mighty shout arose in that street. Somehow, Barry's mind was at peace.

Oct. 30-29

Two-Gun-Sheriffin'

by Clive Crosby



Some of the greatest sheriffs of the West were killers, and some of the greatest killers were sheriffs. This is the story of one of them.

SOMETHING out of the ordinary was going on in Flamango. Usually on a hot summer afternoon the little cowtown seemed deserted and dead. But this afternoon groups of people gathered on the board sidewalks, hung around the corners and under the rickety wooden awnings in front of the stores. They talked to each other excitedly in hushed tones and cast furtive glances toward the tiny 'dobe building that housed the sheriff's office, or toward the gaudy Legal-Tender Saloon directly across the road.

From the Legal-Tender now and then swaggered two or three hard faced heavily armed men. They were Bat Butler's gunmen. Before their arrogant advance the more peaceful citizens of Flamango stopped talking and stared with sullen eyes. But the gunmen always returned to the Legal-Tender. And then the buzz of conversation in the street again competed unsuccessfully with the everlasting buzz of flies.

"I tell yuh, it'll be the end of the war," the fat and sweating butcher told his friend who worked in the saddlery shop. "Bill Harris and Bat Butler 'ull kill each other. They're bound to. I've knowed it for seven years."

"Hell, it's time," snapped the other. "Between 'em they been killin' what little business there was in this forsaken country. Tell you straight, I won't care if they do kill each other."

"Aw, Bill Harris is the best sheriff Flamango County ever had," defended the butcher.

"He's a killer, that's what he is," the other stated positively. "He's got as much feelin' about killin' a man as a sidewinder, a rattlesnake. He'd sooner kill a man than arrest him, any day. Law officers used to get away with that stuff. But I'm tellin' yuh they can't do it no more. I'll bet Sheriff Bill Harris has kept as much business out o' the county as Bat Butler has."

"Aw, he ain't as bad as all that," argued the butcher. "Harris is human. He'd do anything for that kid of his. Been a mother to the boy all his life."

"Yeah," agreed the saddle maker reluctantly, "he does act human toward the boy. An' he's done his share of good for the county. But I tell yuh, his sort of two-gun sheriffin' is out o' date. That stuff just don't go no more."

"Bill Harris won't be out o' date 'til Bat Butler's out o' business," said the butcher.

"Aw, shucks," his friend came back, "Butler's been outsmartin' Bill for years. Why Butler's been gettin' away with murder around here; he's been runnin'

this county an' you know it. The biggest gang of crooks in the country hangs out in the Legal-Tender. They's gettin' stronger every day. And all Bill Harris's been able to do is kill a few of the little fellers. Bat Butler ain't never been arrested. That gambler plays his cards too close for old Harris."

"Bat's pulled a bad one now, though," the butcher mused. "His killin' that puncher was just what Bill's waitin' for. Six-guns is Harris's game. Bat was a fool to touch 'em. But he did, an' now I'm bettin' Harris ends the Flamango County War by killin' that crooked gambler."

"I hope they kill each other," came back the saddle maker.

Ben Jones, who ran the livery stable, hurried up overflowing with news.

"Have yuh heard the latest?" he asked all excitement, and then went on without waiting for a reply. "Bat's got some of his gunmen with him an' he's makin' a stand out at his old horse ranch. He's gonna wait there for Harris to come an' get him. Harris has just got his horse from down at the stable. An' man, he was sure on the prod. Killin' mad, I calls it. He's had a fight with that kid of his. Folks said you could hear 'em swearin' at each other for half a block. That crazy kid was tryin' to keep his father from goin' out after Bat. Can you tie that? *Here comes Harris now!*"

Every eye in Flamango stared at the horseman who had suddenly appeared from around the sheriff's office. The man was little and old and dried out. His face was skinny and cracked and red. But his eyes were squinted to mere slits which looked to neither right nor left and yet seemed to flash fire.

A hush fell over the town. Not a person spoke. Sheriff Bill Harris rode down the road at a trot, standing up in the stirrups, his hands resting on the forks of his saddle. He rode toward Butler's horse ranch. For a long time after he had gone the town stared in silence.

TWO hours later, with deft, long-practiced fingers, the sheriff punched out the empty shells, and reloaded his long-barreled forty-five. Then he squinted cautiously from around the big boulder behind which he was crouching. The one building and the corrals of Butler's horse ranch lay like a map below him. Not a bit of life could he see anywhere. But Harris knew that within that little box-like adobe house was Bat Butler, the gambler boss himself, a fugitive at last.

Heat waves arose from the lifeless range land surrounding the house. In three directions, from Butler's adobe shack, the range extended level and smooth and brown. But in the fourth direction the ground broke into a long, brushy and boulder-strewn side hill which sloped to within a hundred feet of the house itself. It was from this side hill that Harris looked down on the ranch.

The silence was shattered by the thunder of gunfire. Unseen weapons from within the house were throwing hot lead toward that nearby slope. Harris could see nothing of his enemies. The old man-hunter held his fire.

The shooting from the house stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Harris, running with incredible speed for a man in his late fifties, dodged to another boulder, nearer the house. From there he studied the one window and door which faced him. A bit of white showed in the lower corner of the window. Harris rested the barrel of his right-hand Colt over his left arm, and aimed.

"Take that—and *that!*" he growled, as he sent two bullets through the window.

The bit of white disappeared. The sheriff, still crouching, slipped to another rock. His fire was returned, but had no effect. Harris calmly punched out the two spent shells, and reloaded his gun with live cartridges. He fondled the shiny brass things as though he loved them. Then he rolled a cigarette.

"Hey, Harris! I want to talk to you," a voice shouted from the house. "This is me, Bat Butler!"

"Go ahead an' talk your head off," Harris snarled, the smoke from his cigarette coming out through his nose. "I'll do my talkin' with a Colt."

"Yuh better hold up a minute, Sheriff," Butler said. "You don't know what you're doin'."

"The hell I don't."

"No, you don't. I'm tellin' yuh, your son Billy's here in the house with us."

FOR just a moment the sheriff's face lost color. Then it again took on that cold grin.

"Sure 'nough, Harris," Bat's voice continued. "Billy's here in the house with us, an' if you ain't damn careful you're liable to plug him your own self."

Harris thought he saw something moving in the door. He snapped up his gun and fired twice, rapidly. The two explosions blended into one. A man leaped up in the door, screaming, and fell at full length, half in the house and half out.

"That's the kind o' talk I make, Bat. You got anythin' more to say?"

"Listen, Harris," Bat's voice almost pleaded, "you lay off until dark. Then we'll pull out, an' leave Flamango County for good. But if yuh don't lay off, you're——"

"Damn you, Bill Harris," screamed the wounded man lying in the door. His voice completely drowned out Bat's.

"You're sure as hell liable," Bat's voice rose through the noise, "to kill your own——" The rest of the sentence, was drowned out in the wounded man's groaning curses.

"Tell the guy with the big voice to shut up," Harris snarled. "I can't hear what you're sayin'."

"Aw hell, Harris," it was Bat speaking again, "I'm jest a-tellin' yuh that you're gonna murder your own son."

The figure of another man appeared crouching over the body lying in the doorway. This fellow might have been trying to quiet the wounded man, or he might——

Harris didn't wait to find out. He fired just once. The second figure pitched down without a word over the first, and neither of them made any noise after that.

The sheriff shifted to another boulder, always working closer to the house. He snapped away his half-burned cigarette and rolled another. After a couple of puffs, he resumed their conversation.

"Wall, Bat," he drawled, "if Billy's damn fool enough to run with skunks like you, he deserves to be shot. Tell him to stick up his head. I'll show you how I feel about it."

"Have it your own way," Butler replied. "It's gonna be dark pretty soon. Then we're goin' from here."

"Sure y'are," the sheriff sneered. "What of it? I'll foller you to hell, if I have to. But so help me God, Bat, sooner or later I'll get you."

After that the business of exchanging lead settled down to grim watchfulness, and an occasional shot. The sheriff was not one to waste ammunition. But when he thought he saw something move within the house, he fired with an accuracy that had long since become famous in that country.

But dusk was at hand. With the darkness, the firing from the house stopped. Presently a horse nickered from down by the corrals. That meant, to Harris, that Bat, and those of his party who were able to, were leaving.

The sheriff held his fire for a few minutes, and then advanced cautiously toward the house, with one arm outstretched before him. When his hand touched the adobe wall, he followed it along until he came to the door.

"Damn," he muttered, as he stumbled over the two bodies that lay there. He stepped over them and struck a match. On a shelf he found a lamp which had miraculously escaped destruction and lit it.

The lamp lighted up the interior of the house. It was in awesome disorder. Everything was literally shot full of holes.

Harris lit a cigarette from the lamp, and returned to the two bodies lying in the doorway. Rolling them apart, he found that both men were dead. He dragged them, one after the other, into the yard. Their spurs, digging in the dust, cut little zig-zag lines leading from the door to the corral fence where Harris dumped the bodies.

THE sheriff returned to the house, dusting his hands. He examined the interior of the building. While he was idly trying to make a broken table stand up on three legs, the sheriff noticed another body lying on the hard-packed floor, against the wall.

"I musta got me another one o' them buzzards," he remarked. "Wall—one less to get at the next stand."

The sheriff went over to the body, and rolled it over. He stopped. His face went white. His eyes stared.

"My God," he mumbled, sinking down, and looking into the white face before him, "My God—it's Billy!"

Frantically he shook the body.

"Billy! Billy—!" He tried to call the boy back to life. But the young man on the floor was quite dead. Slowly the awful realization seeped through the old

man's mind. His son, his only son, was dead. He remembered Bat's warning.

"Oh, Lord," Harris groaned. His head sank down in his arms. His whole frame seemed to slump down and contract. He remained there for a long while without moving. The oil in the lamp burned low, and the wick began to smoke.

"Oh, Lord," he mumbled to himself.

Presently Harris came to his feet in a sort of daze. He went out to look for firewood. He found some, and built a fire in the corner fireplace. Then he blew out the lamp, and paced the floor, mumbling to himself, and smoking one cigarette after another.

With the first gray of dawn, Harris came out of the house. Even in the half light, the old manhunter looked changed from what he had been when, a few hours before, he had exultantly entered that same house. Then his face had shown his age in a virile, domineering way. Now it was the face of a beaten old man. The self-assurance was gone. His cold blue eyes seemed to stare at things without seeing them. Down in their depths was a vacant, meaningless look.

Harris went around the ranchyard looking for a shovel. He found a rusty, broken one, half buried under an old corral gate. He cleaned it, and with it dug a grave on the top of the slope overlooking the ranch. There he buried his son.

When the last shovelful had been piled on, Harris broke down a little. Tears streaked down his face. He shook his fist at the clouds above, while he mumbled curses at both God and the Devil. Then he drew both guns.

"Damn you," he mumbled, his voice choked with emotion. "Damn you!"

He threw the two guns as far as he could into the nearby brush.

After that, Harris got his horse from where he had picketed him the night before, and rode back toward Flamango.

WHEN the sheriff reached the outskirts of town, he swung off into a side street. Thus following tin-can-littered alleys and muddy back streets, he circled around the town and avoided the populous main street. Once past, he continued on the road to Old Man Johnson's headquarters ranch.

Oct. 30-29

Johnson was the big rancher of the county. He was the leader of the law and order faction which had, for seven years, controlled enough votes outside the town to keep Harris in office.

The old sheriff went directly to his boss. Johnson was in his ranch office when Harris knocked. The rancher gasped when he saw him.

"God, Harris, what's happened to you?" he asked.

Harris groaned, and slumped into a chair.

"Here, brace up, man," the rancher admonished him. "You look as though you'd been through hell."

"I have."

"Well, have a drink, an' tell me about it."

"I reckon I'm through, Johnson," the sheriff mumbled the words. "So far as I'm concerned, Bat's won the war. But it wa'n't Bat that licked me—damn his soul to hell! I licked myself, Johnson. You know me—you know Bill Harris, the guy that shoots first an' asks afterwards. A gunman—a killer!" The old man almost screamed the word. Then he added, softly, "Well, I killed my own son."

Harris slumped further into the chair.

"God," muttered Johnson. He couldn't think of anything else to say.

After a while Harris got up, and unpinned the star from his vest.

"Here," he said, handing it to Johnson. "I've throwed away my guns, an' I'm quittin the first job I ever left unfinished in my life." Then he added as an afterthought, "Reckon it'll be my last job, too."

And Harris went out of the door, and disappeared from Flamango County.

SOME years after Harris had disappeared from Flamango, two men sat at a sidetable in a Mexican joint, far from the scenes of Harris's glory, and talked of the days of the Flamango County war. It was a dirty, commonplace little liquor dive. Mexican and American hay-hands loafed at the bar, or played pool on two battered tables at the rear. Near the two, who sat by the side door, a group of railroaders played poker with a deck of greasy cards, and in a distant corner loafed a couple of big-hatted cowhands, aloof and silent.

"Yeah. Harris sure was one *mala*

hombre," remarked one of the pair at the side table. He was a drifting teamster, who bore no other name than Jake. His one and only claim to fame was the fact that he had been in Flamango during those hectic days; in fact he claimed to have been with the Butler gang, though most folks believed this to be idle boasting. He was always talking about the Flamango war whenever he could find anyone to listen to him.

Old Smitty, Jake's companion, was silent, while he toyed with the heavy club end of a broken billiard cue. He, too, was recalling the past. But nobody knew a thing about Old Smitty's past. People often wondered about it, though. Smitty's manner somehow suggested a past.

Jake ordered a couple of drinks. When the bartender brought them, Jake paid for them. People were always buying Smitty drinks. If they hadn't done so, the old man would have forgotten what whiskey tasted like. Smitty was an out-and-out bum.

"Yeah—I reckon mebbe Harris was a *malo hombre,"* agreed Smitty presently. "But times hez changed. Harris's ways o' handlin' things ain't stylish no more." The old man's words came out jerkily, as though his mind were still in the past. "Nowadays, everybody's thinkin' about business, an' makin' money. Us old-timers what took the land away from the Injuns don't amount to much any more."

Smitty's voice was pensive, reminiscent. Yet his eyes had a piercing blueness that seemed out of place in his old, drink and weather scarred face. That piercing look was characteristic of Smitty. When he looked at a man like that, he seemed to look right through him, into his past, when things had been different.

"They was a lotta them two-gun sheriffs in the old days," Jake drawled. "But they weren't none of 'em as coldblooded as Old Harris."

Smitty was silent. Thoughtfully he ran his hand up and down the polished surface of the cue.

Jake ordered two more whiskeys. The fiery drink loosened his tongue.

"They say Bat Butler purty nigh owns the county up there, now," he remarked. "He's a reg'lar business man. Owns a bank, 'n everythin'. But they tells me he still spends a heap o' time in his old saloon, an' still has a bodyguard o' high priced gunmen. I reckon that's just a fancy o' his'n. Sort o' habit he's got left over from the old days o' the war. I worked fer Bat, y' mind, when I was up there."

Smitty was silent, with that far-away look in his eyes.

"Didja ever hear the straight about how that all busted up there?" Jake asked, persistently. "'At was once we was tougher'n Old Harris. We sure broke that hombre plumb gentle. Ever hear how we done it?"

"No."

Smitty was looking at Jake again. The cue was still gripped in his two old hands. His knuckles showed white.

"Well, it was thisaway," Jake cleared his throat. "Old Harris had a son. He was plumb locoed about that kid. Billy, they called him. The old man thought there weren't nobody nowheres quite like Billy. But the kid got kinda wild an' reckless as he grew up. He got to runnin' around with Bat's crowd.

"'Course ol' Harris didn't like to see his button runnin' with his worst enemy. But there jest weren't nothin' he could do about it. An' anyway, the old man was stuck on that boy; he jest couldn't figger the kid was takin' Bat's line o' talk worth a darn.

"Wall, towards the end there, the fightin' had been pretty light. Both Bat an' Harris was doin' nothin'. Jest waitin' fer a break to wipe the other out. Then one day a waddy from Old Man Johnson's ranch blows into town, an' sits into a poker game what Bat hisself is playin' in. The stakes is runnin' high, an' this cowpoke is losin'. Pretty soon he gets sore. Says he saw Butler dealin' off the bottom of the deck—well, Butler shot him plumb center."

Jake paused long enough to roll and light a cigarette. He offered the makings to Smitty, and the old man also rolled one. The breeze through the door by their side carried the smoke into the room in gray clouds.

"When Harris hears about that killin'," Jake resumed, "I reckon it makes the old devil feel pretty good. He'd got the breaks. Now he could get Bat, which'd be the same as winnin' the war fer the ranchers.

"Well, right after the killin', Bat'd taken me an' a couple of his gunmen, an' we'd gone out to his horse ranch,

'bout a mile from town. But jest before old Harris left town to foller us out, his son Billy comes up an' stops him. They musta had a terrible row, them two. Folks said you could hear 'em all over town. Billy was a-tryin' to keep his father from goin' out after Bat. He said, an' I reckon he believed, that the Johnson waddy had drawed first, and Bat had killed him in self-defense. 'Course, old Bill wouldn't listen to him. He jest cussed him out. Harris was always hard-boiled thataway. He'd cuss God A'mighty or his own son, without battin' an eye. But he didn't mean it none at all, about his son. He said he didn't give a damn if it was self-defense. It was his chance to get Bat, an' hell couldn't stop him.

"In the meantime, we was waitin' out to the horse ranch. An' feller, it was hell. There we was, four of us, waitin' in a little two-by-four mud house; waitin' fer the worst killer that ever lived, to come an' get us. God, it got on our nerves so we come near fightin' each other. Everybody but Bat was fer pullin' out. But Bat wouldn't have none of it. He said the old devil would track us to hell an' back. Said we might as well fight it out right there. We'd never get a better chance to get him. We agreed to wait till dark, it bein' only about an hour off. But them other two gunmen sure came near pullin' out. Funny about them two fellers. Harris killed 'em both later.

"We been waitin' there 'bout a half hour, when we see a rider comin' hell bent, in a cloud of dust. He gets close, an' we see it's Harris's kid, Billy. Bat had always put up with the kid. Figgered he might come in handy some time. He reckoned this was the time. The kid tried to get us to pull out. Bat laughed at him, and tells him to come in an' help us fight his old man. The kid gets mad, tells Bat to go to hell. Bat went fer his gun, an' plugged him."

Smitty's face was white. His left hand gripped the table. His right hand still held that broken cue.

"Well, the kid was deader'n hell, before his hand reached his gun," Jake drawled on, heedless. "Bat laughed, an' said he'd told us the kid was gonna come in handy. 'He'll be handly as hell—*dead!*'"

There was a crash on the floor. Old Smitty had suddenly leaped up, kicking his chair as he did so. The old man seemed to have gone stark mad.

"You dirty stinker!" he screamed. And, swinging the broken cue like a club, he brought it down on Jake's head with all the strength in his old body. There was a dull thud. A sickening crunch of splintered bone. Jake slumped out of his chair sideways, and sprawled on the floor.

Every soul in the room seemed paralyzed. Men stared in wonder, their eyes wide with horror.

Smitty jumped across his victim's body, and faced them from the side door. In a dry, husky voice that penetrated to the farthest corner of the room, he announced, "That man helped murder my son."

Then the screen door banged to, and he was gone.

OLD MAN JOHNSON, the Flamango cattleman, sat in the office of his ranch, and stared at the wall. Johnson was licked, and he knew it. What with rustlers stealing his herds, and more open land-grabbers stealing his grass, he didn't stand a chance in a county controlled by his old enemy, Bat Butler. So thoroughly did Butler now control the legal machinery of the county, that no matter how great the injustice practiced upon the rancher, there was just nothing he could do. But Old Man Johnson looked at it philosophically. He was paying for having lost the war. All he could do was go down fighting. Only it was hard, very hard.

A knock on his door called the rancher back from his worries. He got up, and asked his caller in.

The man who entered was old, and dressed in disreputable clothing. Johnson supposed him to be a tramp or a hobo. Yet the fellow's steel blue eyes had a forceful snap, that seemed strangely out of place in his heavy-lined face. A queer little grin twisted his mouth. It made Johnson think of somebody he had known in the past.

"Don't reckon you remember me, do you, Johnson?" the newcomer said slowly.

"No. You got it on me there," the rancher replied.

"Reckon I have changed a heap from the fightin' sheriff I used to be," the old fellow drawled. "But I'm Bill Harris."

"By gosh!" Johnson could hardly be-

lieve him. "I sure wouldn't have knowed you. Gosh!" The rancher looked at him in wonder, for a full minute. Then he suppressed his visible emotion, and asked, "Where yuh been all these years?"

"Oh, it's a long story, Johnson. I ain't got time fer it now. I came back to *get* Bat Butler."

Johnson sat down slowly, and considered his visitor. The old rancher's face was a mask. He took out the makings, and offered them to Harris. Harris rolled and lighted a cigarette with relish.

"That's a plumb, big, man-sized order, Harris," the rancher remarked as he too rolled a cigarette.

"That dirty stinker murdered my kid. Shot him down in cold blood, he did." The old sheriff's voice was soft and low, yet his words had a ring of finality.

"I heard a different story."

"Sure yuh did. Everybody did. Even I thought I'd shot that kid. But I didn't, Johnson." The words ran off his tongue so fast, they seemed to trip over each other. "By God, I did not! I tell yuh, it was that stinkin' gambler, Bat Butler."

Again Johnson sat for some time in silence. When he spoke, it was not to question the sheriff's statement of fact.

"I'd take it kinda slow, was I you," he said at last. "Butler's a pretty big man in this country. He's got him a bodyguard of gunmen. They're quick-drawin', fast-shootin' gents. Yuh don't wanta go up agin that crowd without thinkin'."

"Thinkin', hell!" Old Bill roared. "That's all I been doin'. For years I been thinkin' I killed my boy. There's been too damn much thinkin'. Now's the time fer action. And by God, I'm the feller that's goin to give it to Bat."

"If your mind's made up——"

"Sure, my mind's made up, Johnson. All hell ain't agoin' to stop me. Loan me a horse an' a couple o' guns in the mornin'. I'll do the rest."

THE next morning Harris shaved, and donned a suit of Johnson's clothes. He asked for the six-shooters. Johnson produced a pair of big Colts. Harris fondled them like long lost pets. Then he carefully took them apart, and oiled each moving piece, while he smoked one cigarette after another. When they were re-assembled, he made sure they were in perfect working order, and then loaded them. He did this, too, very methodically, taking the shells from a newly opened box, hefting them in his hand.

"Don't feel very heavy," he drawled. "But I reckon there is enough lead there to give Bat a damn bad belly ache. Tickets to hell, that's what they are, Johnson. One-way tickets to hell."

The guns loaded, Johnson brought out a pair of cartridge belts, each carrying a well-greased open holster. Harris examined them carefully, and buckled them around his hips, so that a holster hung down either leg. He slipped the guns in, and tested their hang. When they were adjusted to his liking, he tied the thongs at the bottom of the holsters around his legs. Then he practiced the draw a few times.

"Damn it all, I ain't fast like I used to be."

"Shucks," said Johnson, "You don't wanta wait fer no draw. When you go up to get Bat, you wanta have both them guns in your hands, an' both of 'em spittin' lead."

"Don't you worry, none," Harris told him.

The two of them saddled up and rode into town.

Harris insisted that they ride up the main street. At the far end was an old livery stable. There they left their horses. The stableman greeted Johnson familiarly, then looked inquiringly at Harris.

"Hmm. Reckon I seen you somewheres before, ain't I?" he asked. "You've stopped here before, ain'tcha?"

"Yeah, Ben. Reckon I have," Harris grinned a little. "My name's Bill Harris."

"What? You?—— God!" Jones stared in astonishment. He saw the two guns hanging from Harris's waist. "God!" he gasped again.

Harris grinned, and he and Johnson walked up the street. They walked toward the Legal-Tender Saloon.

HARRIS stopped in front, and looked the old saloon over. It was one of the few wooden buildings in town. Over the door was a high false front, but the whole structure seemed to be held up by the 'dobe houses on either side of it. Harris remembered that the interior of the saloon was narrow and long, and the back part

of it was quite dark, if the lamps were not lighted.

"Reckon you better stay out here, Johnson. I'm goin' in alone. Don't wanta be draggin' any o' my friends into this."

"Two's better than one," the rancher objected.

"No, dammit. This is my fight. I don't want nobody helpin' me."

"All right. All right. Have it your own way."

Harris turned, and again looked up at the saloon. That little familiar grin twisted his mouth. Thoughtfully, he snapped away his cigarette, and rolled another. When this one was lighted, it hung down from his lower lip as though glued there. Then hitching his belt with a swagger, Harris pushed through the doors into the saloon.

It was rather dim inside. Harris's eyes, accustomed to the bright sunlight, could just make out some figures standing at the bar.

"Where's Bat Butler?" ne demanded.

As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he saw that there were three men loafing at the bar, and two others high-carding each other at a nearby table. Harris sized up all five of them as professional gunmen. Undoubtedly, they were Bat's bodyguard. That meant the gambler must be near at hand. But for one moment Harris had a sickening thought that he never would be able to get past these efficient looking guards. Nevertheless he grimly repeated his question. "Where's Bat Butler?"

"Who the hell wants to know?" drawled one of the three men at the bar, as he sized old Harris up.

Harris returned his stare before answering, and saw a tall, bony eagle-faced man, wearing two guns.

"None o' your lip, younker," the old man snapped, when his eyes had become fully accustomed to the light. "Bat's the boss of this joint. He's the hombre I'll talk to." The cigarette, clinging to his lip, danced up and down as he spoke.

"Yeah?" sneered Eagle-Face. "Mebbe you will, an' mebbe you won't. But if you don't talk pretty to me, you won't talk to nobody."

"To hell with you. Where's Bat?"

The three men at the bar glided out until they were all facing Harris with plenty of elbow room. The two men who had been playing cards rose from the table.

"You're a cocky rooster, fer an old codger, ain'tcha, feller?" taunted Eagle-Face. "Well, fer them remarks of yours, you won't see nobody. Get to hell out of here!"

"Yeah?" A little grin twisted the old sheriff's face. He was crouching low, his hands near his guns. "Who the hell's gonna make me?"

Bat's gunmen realized suddenly that in this little but grim stranger they were facing a killer. As though Harris's words had been a command, their hands flashed for their weapons. As they moved, so did Harris. It was five to one, and the old sheriff grinned, a twisted little grin.

Years of drinking and brooding had cost Harris his speed. Eagle-Face fired the first shot. It hit the old sheriff in the shoulder. He spun around, and fell. But even as Harris hit the floor, he rolled forward to his knees, with both guns blazing.

THE years of dissipation had hurt the old sheriff's speed but not his marksmanship. The roar of the guns was pierced by the death-scream of Eagle-Face. Then the man beside him was hit, and knocked sideways into the way of one of his companions. Smoke, thick and pungent, eddied around the men. The flash of six-guns showed orange in the haze.

Harris's body jerked back, as another bullet tore through his frame. The old manhunter immediately regained his balance. Now, his right foot was planted firmly on the floor, and he was slowly coming to his feet.

Another gunman crumpled before Harris's fire as though all the muscles in his body had suddenly gone limp. The fourth straightened up and fell over backward, emptying his gun wildly through the ceiling as he went. Harris, too, was hit again. His left arm jerked back, and fell limp at his side. But his fingers somehow retained their hold on the six-gun.

Harris now stood squarely on both his wide-spaced feet. His body was bent into a gunman's crouch. But it was an exaggerated crouch, caused by the wounds through his body.

The last shot in Harris's right-hand gun hit the remaining gunman between the eyes. The fellow dropped to the floor without a sound. Harris threw away his empty weapon, and snatched

the gun from his useless left hand. Three live cartridges remained in that gun.

"Where's Bat?" Harris snarled, in a hoarse, awful voice. It sounded like the voice of death. Somehow it seemed to come from around those wounds deep in his body. And the cigarette, still clinging to his lower lip, danced to the words.

"Where's Bat?" that terrible voice sounded again. Harris swayed as he spoke. But slowly, as though with superhuman will, he began to move toward the rear of the saloon.

A figure arose from one of the tables in the back. It was Butler. He had been there from the first, watching the fight with cold superiority. Harris had not seen him.

"Bat! Bat Butler!" the old sheriff tried to call, but he couldn't raise that voice above a growl. "Where are you, Bat Butler?"

"Was you wantin' to see me, Harris?" Butler asked softly.

Then Harris saw him. "Yes, you murderer." And he laughed with little mirthless snarls.

Bat snorted. His mouth twisted into a leer. "You're a dead man, Harris," he said. And with deliberation he drew a gun from under his coat, aimed at his old enemy, and fired.

The bullet hit Harris in the belt buckle, and went through him. The belt slipped away from the broken buckle, and, with the holster, fell, and clattered around his feet.

It was a terrible wound but Harris, crouching a little lower, only laughed deep in his throat, and again that burnt-out cigarette danced.

Bat's face turned white. Suddenly he seemed to have become paralyzed with fear. He stared at his ancient enemy through glassy eyes, while Harris slowly raised his gun.

For one long moment time seemed to stand still. Then there was a terrific roar. The old sheriff emptied his gun. The three bullets almost cut the gambler in two.

Through the smoke came men running, calling. They caught old Harris as he tottered, almost fell. Johnson, the rancher, had him, held him in his arms. the rancher's voice was shrill, anxious. "You—you're hurt, Harris! Where——"

The old sheriff's body slumped with weakness, but his voice was clear, surprisingly strong. "Hurt? Yeah—— But what's the difference, Bat Butler is lying over there dead. Dead as hell. The Flamango County War's finished now."

The King of Kajak Mountain

by HOWARD E. MORGAN

Author of "Shorty Turns an Encore," "The $5000 Clue," etc.

Old Lophorn, the bull moose, did not have to take odds from anything living.

LIMPY ALLEN stopped in midstride, and head at an attentive angle, queried the still, frosty air. There was no sound, none save the whispering clatter of autumn browned leaves on an oak scrub near at hand. The old man's pale blue eyes, peering casually but alertly from beneath shuttered lids, inspected the dull gray wilderness spread out before him, finally coming to rest on his little cabin nestling cozily in the heart of a scrub fir thicket on the ridge top half a mile distant.

"Doggone!" he grunted. "I could of swore—"

The mumbling words stopped short as a long drawn out, mournful howl emanating from the opposite side of the valley struck harshly upon the frosty stillness. An involuntary shudder spidered up and down the old trapper's back. An I-told-you-so smile twitched across his whiskered face.

"Wolves," he muttered, "I knew it!"

The eerie call sounded again. Again, and still again. Each time it was nearer.

The old man shrugged his angular shoulders, and adjusting the heavy pack on his back, limped on across the gray valley toward the cabin on the ridge top.

Although the wolves were drawing swiftly nearer and there was fifty pounds of venison steak in that pack on his back, Limpy Allen was sure that the gaunt, gray marauders were not following him. In the first place, there was not a breath of air stirring; none that he could detect, that is. Even if the ever

hungry devils had scented that meat they would not approach a man thus boldly. Limpy Allen knew. He was vastly wise in the ways of the wilderness. No, there was something else, some other living thing back there which was responsible for the pack's attention.

Being well acquainted with all of his wilderness neighbors as he was, Limpy Allen hated and despised the wolves, those gray killers whose very call contained a subtle threat that made him shiver every time he heard it. Although they never bothered him, he hated them worse, if possible, than he did the carcajou, the wolverine, that destructive sneakthief and killer which is the bane of every trapper's life.

Whenever the chance presented Limpy took active part against the wolves regardless of the circumstances. So it was that, as he drew near the ridge and his little cabin, he slowed his step and removed the ancient rifle from its protective casing of caribou skin. He gnawed a ragged chunk of tobacco from a black plug, and edging into a sparse growing sumac thicket at the base of the rocky wall, waited, rifle in hand.

"Dunno what it's all about," he muttered; "but you're pushin' somebody or somethin' right close, you lousy gray devils, and, I'm ag'in you, as per usual."

THE old man had scarcely settled himself when a crashing racket developed in the alder swamp through which he had just passed. In his excitement he forgot to chew. "Moose!" he muttered. The words were scarcely out of his mouth, when, its approach presaged by a violent shaking of the slim-trunked saplings, a huge moose bull charged out into the open.

Limpy Allen's understanding eyes discovered many things that an ordinary man might have missed in the single brief instant that the huge beast stood there, breathing hard, its little eyes peering near-sightedly, this way and that.

In the first place, Limpy instantly recognized the moose as Old Lophorn, the recognized king of the entire Kajak Mountain district. Even a casual observer might have discovered the reason for the big bull's nickname—one side of its antlers was curiously crumpled. The other side spread outward and upward in a sweeping palmated effect like any other moose. Each season those antlers grew in exactly the same way.

Although it is generally conceded that a moose bull will fight at the slightest provocation in mating season, it was evident that old Lophorn had been fleeing from its enemies, the wolves. Limpy Allen did not question this circumstance, however. The wise old moose, a veteran of many battles, had fled merely until an open space was reached. In the open he would be in better position to cope with his enemies.

Even as the trapper watched, old Lophorn turned right about to face the swamp, and shaking his deformed headgear angrily, backed away until he stood close against the rocky wall less than fifty yards from the spot where the man crouched. As the moose turned its side, Limpy Allen made another discovery which brought a quick surge of sympathy to his kindly old heart. The big bull's rump, all along the left side, was smeared with blood. There was an ugly gash there nearly two feet long.

"They smelled the blood an' it made 'em crazy," the old trapper opined. They—"

Limpy Allen abruptly lifted his rifle as three silent gray shapes slipped, wraithlike, out of the shadowed alder thicket. Before he could shoot, they separated. As though following a signal of some sort, the three wolves circled widely about. And then, quicker than the eye could follow, they turned, and each one approaching from a different angle, hurled themselves headlong at the moose.

IN HIS lifetime Limpy Allen had witnessed many championship fights between various doughty wilderness battlers. He had once observed at close range a battle to the death between two grizzlies; he had seen several fights between rival moose bulls. He was, therefore, in a general way, familiar with the bewildering speed with which a moose, one of the most ungainly animals in appearance, can move. Even so, he was filled with wondering amazement at the quickness and precision with which old Lophorn met the lightning-swift onslaughts of those three wolves.

One of the wolves sprang in from the left; another from the right; the third leaped for the bull's throat. Seemingly without moving his massive head and shoulders, old Lophorn struck out

swiftly with his right foreleg. The sharp-edged hoof struck a wolf fairly in the chest. So tremendous was the power behind that slashing blow that the wolf's seventy-pound body turned over and over in the air, finally coming to rest in a brush tangle a dozen feet away. Lophorn lowered his antlered head, suddenly, catching the brunt of the second wolf's forthright attack on his antlers. Then, carrying the struggling wolf's body along, he struck sidewise at the third wolf which had jumped him from the left.

If that stabbing blow had landed fairly, another one of old Lophorn's enemies would have been out of the fight for all time to come; but at the last moment, while still in the air, the wolf twitched aside. That pointed antler brushed the lean gray beast's belly. Within the next instant, the wolf's forepaws touched lightly upon the moose bull's back. There was a flash of white teeth, and the attacker was gone, leaving another bleeding gash along the bull's sore rump. With a flirt of his head, Lophorn tossed the remaining wolf, which had been clinging catlike to his antlered head, a dozen feet away upon the ground.

This initial attack had consumed no more than a dozen seconds, all told. So swiftly had things happened that Limpy Allen could not have used his gun with any assurance of accuracy even if it had been necessary. His quick eyes, which had been following the hurtling journey of the third wolf through the air, had just followed the limping beast into the thicket, when three more wolves appeared suddenly at the edge of the thicket. These three followed exactly the same tactics as had their predecessors.

The moose was not quite so successful this time. The huge beast was breathing in wheezy snorts. His hindquarters seemed to sag ever so slightly. He missed a rapierlike thrust with his right forefoot. Just as that foreleg was poised ready to strike, the wolf which had sprung in from the left, hit him. Thrown partially off balance, the moose missed altogether, stumbled sidewise and nearly fell. At the last moment, disregarding the menace approaching him from the front, he threw his antlered head upward and struggled to his feet. As he came upright, his throat was exposed for just a moment; and in that instant, a set of strong white teeth found a hold just below the bell.

IT WAS then that Limpy Allen went into action. He found over the rifle sights the gray body that clung to Lophorn's throat. In response to the spanking report, the wolf's clinging body fell away, struck the ground, rolled over and over, then twitching spasmodically, lay very still.

Without taking the gun from his shoulder the old trapper fired again and still again. Sharp yelps followed each shot. He glimpsed a huge dark gray wolf—evidently the pack leader—which was approaching confidently seemingly intent upon lending courage to its injured comrades. Limpy sighted and fired quickly—too quickly. His bullet brushed the stiff roach hair along the big wolf's neck. A second shot found its mark. In response to that second shot, the black wolf's sturdy body spun half about and collapsed upon the ground with a snapping corkscrew motion.

With quick fingers the old hunter reloaded his gun. He fired once more at a fleeing gray shape, and then in response to an angry snort from old Lophorn, he swung the rifle quickly about.

The old moose was painfully familiar with rifles. The instant Limpy's first shot had sounded, the big bull, ignoring the wolves, had turned and faced the man. Now, forefeet spread far apart, truculent alertness evident in every line of his huge body, the moose bull slowly approached Limpy Allen. The old man's jaws began to work rapidly on the all but forgotten cud of chewing tobacco. He spat a thin, long stream of tobacco juice in the general direction of the oncoming moose.

"G'wan, now," he said, "ain't you got no sense atall? Here I be, wastin' good ammunition jest to give you a hand an' you start pickin' on me. Danged ol' fool! Git! Shoo!"

Following that last noisy objugation, the hunter waved his arms and yelled. Old Lophorn stopped in his tracks. His little red eyes observed the man with a sort of fierce inquisitiveness.

"I don't wanta shoot you, you ol' scut," the little hunter said. "Them damned antlers o' your'n ain't no good. An' you're so old your doggone beef will be tougher'n tripe."

The moose shook its antlered head

and snorted. 'Don't argue with me, now," the old man muttered. "I know what I'm talkin' about. You don't. You never ate moose venison. I have. Oodles of it. An' when I say you're too tough to eat, I know what I'm talkin' about. Savvy? An'—an'—anyways, I jest saved your life; ain't you got no gratitude?"

Old Lophorn snorted again. The dead body of one of the wolves attracted his attention. With quick mincing steps he approached his dead enemy. With a scooping motion of his antlered head, he tossed the wolf clear across the open space into the bushes. Then, without another glance at the man, old Lophorn turned, and limping slightly, disappeared in the thicket.

Limpy Allen wiped his mouth with the back of a hand and grinned. "Guess that was tellin' him," he muttered. "Danged ol' fool!" And chuckling softly the old trapper started up the steep ridge wall toward his little cabin.

AS MAY already have been gathered, Limpy Allen, although by profession a trapper, was sympathetically interested in all his furred and feathered neighbors. This particular year, he devoted more of his time than usual to studying the activities of his friends. Something queer was due to happen, this year. The gray wilderness was a veritable hive of industry. The bees, those tireless pace setters for all of Nature's workmen, labored from dawn till night. Whereas they usually hived up early in September, this year they hovered about the frost wilted gentians in the meadow until snow came. And the bears—even Grouchy, the old grizzly—seemed motivated by some impulse which moved them to frantic endeavor. Without exception, Kajak Mountain bears holed up several weeks earlier than was customary.

It had been several years since there had been wolves in Kajak Basin. Evidently a hard winter was in prospect. The wolves had come down out of the hills, warned in some miraculous manner of the famine to come. And they had attacked old Lophorn. In itself, this was an almost unheard of circumstance. A wolf pack—no matter how strong—will seldom attack a full grown moose bull. Not, that is, until all other easier sources of food supply are exhausted.

In times of starvation, they will attack a moose "yard" and *will* offer battle to the bull in charge of that "yard." But in all his life Limpy Allen had never before known of a wolf pack tackling a full grown moose bull in rutting season. Every wilderness dweller knows that in mating season the bull moose, that usually aloof, good-natured fellow, is a bad egg—a swift, cunning, and willing fighter that had best be let alone.

In the late fall just before the great snows had locked Kajak Basin in an armor plating of snow and ice, several isolated bands of Crees straggled down out of the North bound for the settlements. The native Indian possesses to a considerable extent what the white man calls a hunch, but which is a very part of most of the furred and feathered dwellers of the wilderness. From the Indians, Limpy learned that there had this year been no caribou. The Indians had observed the hundred and one other signs, too, all of which pointed to a hard winter.

But, Limpy Allen was not particularly impressed by these signs. He had spent twenty years in the northland. The wilderness was his home. He had passed through many bad years when famine had been rife in the white lands and he never yet failed to secure game when game was needed to replenish the somewhat scant store of supplies which he, each year, toted one hundred and fifty miles overland to his winter home at the base of Kajak Mountain. What had once been done could be done again.

So it was that the old trapper refused to worry and set about laying out his trapline in and out about the frozen streams that twisted across Kajak Basin, and along the windswept ridgetops—as usual.

THERE was one circumstance, however, which Limpy Allen did not take into account. Each year as his familiarity with that vast northland which was his adopted home grew he brought in with him less and less in the way of foodstuffs. In the first place he was no longer a young man, and the long haul from Helper's Run to Kajak Mountain appeared in the light of a increasingly formidable task. In the second place, like a scarred and battered old grizzly, which with age, becomes almost exclusively a meat eater,

Limpy Allen, each succeeding year, depended more and more upon meat as the basis of his food supply. This particular year, his stock of store goods was smaller than ever before.

Even so, however, it was not until midwinter that the old trapper began to feel the pinch of famine. Game surely was scarce; almost extinct in fact. He spent more and more of his time hunting. By the first of February he was neglecting his traplines in order to take long hunting trips down in the valley where occasional moose were still to be found.

March came and he was still faced with two long months of winter when the scurvy attacked him. He had had no meat for nearly a month. The scurvy had been brought on due to an almost exclusive diet of starchy foods. Red meat is not a cure for scurvy but, when fresh vegetables are not obtainable, meat will allay the disease.

Even so, however, it was not the scurvy that bothered Limpy as much as did the threat of starvation. By the middle of March all his food was gone.

Limpy had not visited the lower end of Kajak Basin where old Lophorn usually yarded with his herd for the winter, this for two reasons. In the first place, he did not want to shoot the old moose who had shared his sovereignty of the entire Kajak district for many years; in the second place, that strip of alder-strewn, muskeg-dotted swamp where old Lophorn had, for the past dozen years, made his winter headquarters, was almost impassable. In spots the trees grew so thickly that a man could scarcely wedge his body between them. To an uninformed observer, it would have been a mystery how a full grown moose could ever make its way through such a jungle. But this was no mystery to Limpy Allen. Many times the old trapper had seen a full grown moose bull with a fifty-inch spread of antler slip through a thicket as swiftly and noiselessly as a shadow; and too, he had seen those ungainly monarchs of the woods tear at headlong speed through dense thickets, where a man—that arrogant creature—would be helpless.

IT WAS not until the last of his carefully hoarded supply of food was gone that Limpy Allen's reluctant thoughts turned toward old Lophorn. Of all the moose that inhabited Kajak Basin, Lophorn would be one of the last to fall victim to those hunger stricken ravagers from the hills—the wolves and the cougars. Old Lophorn had emerged from two other famine haunted winters, the trapper recalled, sleek, well fed and happy, and with his little herd intact. Perhaps this time it would not be necessary to harm old Lophorn himself. Some of his herd must be left; a yearling bull, for instance.

The little trapper had eaten nothing for two days when he finally started out armed with his old Mauser, bound for that strip of dense swamp on the opposite side of the valley—and old Lophorn.

Limpy Allen had gone without food before, hence he was familiar with all the unpleasant manifestatons of hunger. Even so he was surprised to find himself so weak. At the end of every half mile or so, he was obliged to stop and rest.

It was night when he reached his objective. He made camp on the edge of the swamp. Despite his weariness, however, he slept but little. The hunger pains were at their worst right now; in a few days a sort of numbness would replace the griping hurts that this night shot through his empty stomach and kept him awake all through the night.

He broke camp early next morning, and after drinking several quarts of hot water to start his sluggish circulation, pushed determinedly on into the swamp.

The snow was soft in the black thicket. There were many tracks in this soft snow—wolves, cougar, and bear. The old trapper was not surprised to find these latter. Although it is generally understood that bears invariably hole up for the winter, Limpy Allen knew better.

Grouchy, the ugly old grizzly, for instance, had, to Limpy Allen's knowledge, never holed up. A meat eater Grouchy was and a hunter of sorts. Limpy almost instantly recognized those huge long tracks there in the soft snow of the swamp. They were freshly made, those tracks, and Grouchy the grizzly had made them!

The old trapper grinned and mumbled to himself. The presence of the grizzly —beyond doubt the smartest hunter in the entire Kajak district—argued that there was almost surely game near at

hand. Chances were, the little man told himself, the bear's objective was the same as his own—old Lophorn! And the bear must be very hungry indeed, for old Lophorn, the moose and Grouchy, the grizzly bear had occupied Kajak Basin for many years without once coming to blows. Not that they were friends. Far from it; but they did respect each other's redoubtable fighting qualities. It was evident then that the bear had exhausted every other possible source of food supply before turning to the moose.

"Things must be wuss even than I suspected," the old man muttered. "Grouchy would never tackle Lophorn if he warn't plumb desprit."

IT WAS mid-morning when Limpy Allen came upon the first of the moose tracks which he felt sure identified the outer boundary of a moose yard. The old trapper advanced with infinite caution, easing his way in and out at a snail's pace between the close growing saplings.

Just as he was beginning to think that the tracks he had stumbled upon had been made by some lone moose isolated from its herd and long since killed and devoured by some hungry enemy, a dark splotch in the center of a semi-open space just ahead which he had taken for a shadow, moved. For several minutes the old man stood there motionless as a gaunt, gray, wilderness statue only his pale blue eyes shifting slowly this way and that.

The "shadow" did not move again; but at the end of perhaps five minutes of motionless watching Limpy Allen identified that dark splotch. It was a moose! Old Lophorn, himself!

Having long since shed his antlers, the big bull looked curiously naked and unfamiliar. But there was no mistaking that ponderous bulk. Limpy Allen could unhesitatingly have picked old Lophorn from among a thousand other moose. The huge beast stood broadside to the hunter, presenting a perfect target. Limpy Allen's rifle was clutched tightly in mittened hand. A single well placed shot—and—

But for some reason at the moment unknown to him Limpy hesitated. The big moose bull seemed to be alone. This hardly seemed possible. The rest of the herd must be near at hand. It was this latter possibility that influenced the old hunter to hold his fire. If there *were* other moose, he did not want to shoot Lophorn. The old moose was *his* friend. The previous fall he had saved the old rascal from the wolf pack.

But there were *no other moose there!* Of this fact Limpy Allen was finally convinced. Old Lophorn was alone—the sole survivor of that period of red anarchy, which had this year accompanied the famine in Kajak Basin.

The old man swallowed hard. Slowly, then—very, very slowly—he lifted his rifle. Just as the gun's black barrel swung sidewise about a slim trunked alder and lifted sharply until it unwaveringly indicated a certain spot just behind the moose bull's shoulder—there was an interruption.

WITHOUT the slightest warning, old Lophorn's ungainly body took on sudden motion. With a sort of gasping snort, the huge beast swung half about and charged headlong across the trampled open space. Limpy Allen's first startled thought was that the moose was charging *him.* His finger tightened on the trigger. But he did not fire.

At the last moment the moose turned aside ever so slightly and crashed headlong through a clump of alders less than ten feet from the spot where the man stood. The gun's black barrel sought to follow that swiftly moving figure. Once again the man's finger tightened on the trigger. But, once again he held his fire.

A deafening racket emanated from behind that black alder clump—squeals, roars, snorts, and explosive grunts.

Bending low, tense bodied and alert, Limpy Allen squinted through the cloud of powdery snowdust into the shadowy blackness beyond those alders. At what he saw a gasp of downright amazement whistled through his white lips. Grouchy, the grizzly! Old Lophorn had tackled the bear!

Even so, it was not sight of that titanic struggle going on there before his very eyes which was responsible for the old trapper's gasping amazement. Directly behind him, no more than ten feet away, were fresh bear tracks in the snow. The grizzly had been stalking *him!* Absolutely noiselessly, Bruin had crept up to within leaping distance. Within another instant, chances were,

the bear would have charged and Limpy Allen would have been a gone goose.

Without doubt Lophorn had scented both the man and the bear. The wise old bull had waited there, motionless, evidently pondering in its own brute way what to do. The bear was its accepted enemy and had probably been haunting the yard there in the swamp for days. Utterly ignoring the man then, old Lophorn had tackled the bear, incidentally, of course, saving Limpy Allen's life.

FORGETFUL for the moment of his long-empty stomach the little trapper watched that historic battle with shining eyes. He saw instantly that the two wilderness battlers were in a way, evenly matched. Old Lophorn was in good physical condition but was, of course, at a distinct disadvantage due to the absence of antlers.

The bear, on the other hand, was thin, apparently half starved. The beast's yellowish hide, mangy and utterly devoid of hair in spots, covered its scrawny body loosely like an oversized coat on a man. But the bear was far from being a cripple. He had taken the little end of the first flurried attack. Old Lophorn had fooled the bear. Grouchy had, of course, expected the enemy to attack with its head. Lophorn had feinted, merely, with a bucking motion of his antlerless head, then as the bear reared backward, the moose had with amazing swiftness changed its tactics.

Just as the grizzly came up on its haunches, the bull had stepped daintily sidewise and struck out with a razor-edged hoof. That hoof had struck the bear on a shoulder and bowled him over. Roaring his surprised dismay Grouchy had rolled over and over, bounced to his feet and swung purposefully about.

It was at this point that Limpy Allen's interested gaze had taken up the course of the battle.

The grizzly seldom hugs its enemy as does the black bear. Instead, the grizzly strikes with its forepaws edged with three inch, eviscerating claws. It was the bear that scored the next point. With deceptive swiftness, the huge beast came up on its haunches and struck out. That bulky appearing paw shot outward and downward like the striking head of a rattler. The unsheathed claws ripped deep along the moose bull's neck. The tremendous force behind that blow sent the moose to its knees.

For a single instant it looked as though the fight was over. The bear sprang forward and threw itself bodily upon its floundering enemy. But old Lophorn was not yet beaten. With a surging heave of its lumpy shoulders the moose scrambled to its feet bringing the clinging bear along. The grizzly reached for the back of the bull's neck with its teeth. Limpy could not tell whether or not those yawning jaws found a hold, for within the next second both moose and bear were gone.

LIKE a flash old Lophorn had swung clear about and rushed madly away through the thicket, the bear clinging to its back. But, old Lophorn was not beaten; he was not fleeing. Limpy Allen knew what was in the wind and inwardly applauded the bull's sagacity. Within the first fifty feet the expected happened.

The bear was brushed away from old Lophorn's back as a cow's swishing tail will remove a persistent fly. The moose plunged between two close-growing trees, and turned sidewise even as it squeezed through the narrow opening. The bear's clinging bulk collided solidly with one of those trees, and grunting, the disconcerted one sprawled ingloriously upon the ground.

The moose came to a sliding stop, pivoted right about on its seemingly jointless legs, and before the bear could recover its balance struck outward and downward with its rigid forelegs. Both of those pile driving blows went home with telling effect on the bear's body. The grizzly reached up and clung weakly to the bull's neck, locking its forelegs about its enemy's head much as a man will grasp an object with his arms. But there was no strength in that hold.

Old Lophorn backed away, striking out again and again even as he retreated. The end came with unexpected suddenness. Seemingly sensing its enemy's growing weakness, the moose abruptly straightened, reared upward and back like a skittish horse, and then brought both razor-edged hoofs down with killing force.

The grizzly sprawled on its back in the snow. Instantly then, the moose was upon its stunned opponent, and within the next thirty seconds had slashed the

life out of that feebly struggling, yellow body.

Limpy Allen moistened his dry lips. "Doggone!" he muttered. And again, "doggone!"

Old Lophorn looked up at the sound of the man's voice. The trapper did not lift his rifle. He merely crouched there, staring. "Doggone!" he said again. "Some fight! Wouldn't of missed it fer a million dollars."

The moose snorted and pawed angrily sending a cloud of snow dust puffing upward.

Abruptly Limpy Allen realized that he was the object of the moose bull's disturbment. He realized, too, that he was very hungry and that, standing there before him, was a veritable mountain of good red meat, tough and stringy to be sure, but meat. And it was meat he was after. He lifted his rifle slowly. But, for the third time that day he held his fire. As he squinted over the sights, his pale eyes softened. "Doggone!" he muttered. "I sure hate to do it. Murder, that's what it is. I—"

HE LOWERED the gun ever so slightly and shouted. "G'wan, now!" he yelled. "Git!"

The moose stood, four legs braced far apart, observing the man with keen inquisitive eyes.

"Yore a bad egg, right enough," the man said; "a plumb mean one in a fight. But, me, I kin lick you. You oughta know that by this time. Licked better moose than you are, I have. Jest one little slug from this here ol' gun an' —an'—an' yore name is jest venison. Guess that makes you think some, don't it?"

And as the moose still stood there breathing hard but otherwise absolutely motionless. Limpy added, "I'm givin' you about ten seconds to git the hell outa here. Understand? Me, I'm a good hearted feller. I'm willin' to be satisfied with that b'ar meat providin' you ain't plumb ruined it. Think it over. Nothin' could be fairer than that. Here I be, danged nigh starved to death with a thousand pounds of venison almost in reach of my hand. Still an' all, I'm bein' a good feller—"

In the midst of the man's wordy harangue, old Lophorn came to a decision. With a flirt of its no-account tail, the ungainly appearing beast pivoted half about and disappeared behind a curtain of powdery snow in the black thicket.

Limpy Allen shrugged, and grinned somewhat shamefacedly. He found his hunting knife and tested its edge on a calloused thumb. "Shore was *some* fight," he muttered. "*Some* scrapper, he is. Doggone, I jest couldn't shoot him. An', anyhow," he soliloquized, "b'ar meat ain't so bad."

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THIRTEEN NOTCHES

by FOSTER-HARRIS

Author of "Poison Pool," "The Hell-Shooter," etc.

Poison Willis made a mistake when he shot down unarmed Big Jim Canada and boasted that he needed but one more notch to fill his gun butt.

IT WAS over so quickly that not a dozen men of the three score or more in the big barrel house really knew what had happened.

Big Jim Canada, young, husky driller whirled up and his open palm cracked against Poison Willis' face like a shot. "Call me that!" he roared. "You'll fight, you—"

Poison Willis, the John Law of Sulphur Creek, reeled back. His hand moved like a deliberate piece of machinery, so precise and sure and even that you hardly realized its speed. A black gun came from nowhere under his coat, licked out in a direct, underhand gesture, spat orange flame once—and Big Jim Canada, driller, slid gently down to the floor, a pathetically puzzled expression on his young face, a black bullet hole, seeping blood, in his khaki shirt, exactly over the heart.

For an instant, horrified silence. Then, bursting involuntarily from some one in the crowd, "Why, yuh damned murderer! He hadn't no gun!"

The crouching officer turned. "Who said that?" he demanded. "Step out and say it to my face! Any of you! All of you, then! Well, then you damned cowards, shut your mouths!"

For a moment he glared at them. Hoping someone would answer. Then he laughed, a short, insulting laugh. "Don't nobody forget," his hard voice lashed at them, "I'm the Law here. Anybody jumps me passes West. This here's Number Twelve. Anybody craves to be Thirteen, step out!"

The crowd said nothing. They were oil workers, most of them, not gunmen. The man who faced Poison Willis simply committed suicide.

Willis laughed again. Insolently, he took out his pocket knife, twirled the gun in his hand so that the butt came upward and all could see that the bottom of the right grip, made of walnut, was nearly filled with notches. Slowly, deliberately he carved another notch.

He slid the gun out of sight, looked at them and laughed once more. "Don't nobody forget that crossing the Law in this field's sudden death," he reminded them. "If anybody don't like this tell 'em come see me. I got twelve notches on this cannon. Room for just one more. I'd admire to have it."

He turned his back on them, walking slowly out of the room, challenging them to do something by the very swagger of his shoulders. Like a tiger that has gotten a taste of human blood. Poison Willis now killed men for the pure joy of killing. Believing himself invincible, he made others believe it.

Only when the doors had closed behind him did the room come out of that strained, frozen silence. And even then the oil workers kept their sentiments to themselves. The field was full of stool pigeons, of toadies who curried favor by running to Willis with every threat, every criticism they heard. And Poison Willis had a very simple but highly effective method of silencing criticisms and threats. Either the critic left the field very hurriedly—or Willis picked a fight and killed him.

Old Springpole Anderson, helping to

pick the dead body of the young driller gently up from the floor, lay it on a table beneath a stained table cloth until the undertaker arrived, voiced the question in the minds of every man in the room who had known Big Jim Canada —and most of the oil workers had.

"Who—who's gonna tell his brother about this?"

NOBODY answered. Not a man wanted that job. Big Jim Canada and Little Jim Canada were twin brothers. Both drillers, both of a size, both working for the same Plains Petroleum Corporation, on the same well. Big, friendly, likeable guys, square as a die hombres who would lend a friend the shirt off their backs, brothers who had stuck together, worked, played, eaten, slept together since babyhood. Working on the same drilling well, Big Jim had had the morning tower, that is the shift which works from midnight until noon, while Little Jim had the afternoon tower, from noon until midnight. Otherwise Little Jim would have been here with his brother.

Springpole Anderson pulled the stained table cloth gently over the dead, young face, still holding that last, pathetically puzzled expression. His own face was working. "Reckon I'll have to go tell Little Jim," he said very quietly. "I'm a old man. Mebbe he'll listen to me—"

Anderson stopped. But the men around him knew what he had been going to say. Little Jim would try to avenge Big Jim's death. And Little Jim was a terrible fighter, yes, one of the fastest men with his hands in all the mid-continent oil fields. But he was a fist fighter, a fighter who would stand up on his hind legs, give his enemy a fair, square show and beat him into ribbons. He was not a gunman. Little Jim, facing Poison Willis trying to avenge Big Jim, would merely commit suicide.

Shaking his head, Springpole Anderson passed slowly out of the barrelhouse, into the night. Sulphur Creek was whooping it up as usual, the one long, unpaved street jammed from curb to curb with cars and trucks, the board sidewalks flowing with men. Springpole could smell the sharp, raw scent of crude oil, of gas from the scores and hundreds of wells, some of them right among the buildings in the boom town. Sulphur Creek, the boom city and Sulphur Creek, the great, flush oil field alike were at the peak of their lurid career.

It was a cold, frosty night. As he drove out of town, staring at the gleaming, electric lights on the hundreds of derricks, hearing the hiss of boilers popping off, the steady *ker-thump, ker-thump* of walking beams on all sides, the faint strains of wild, jazz music, half-drunken, feminine screams, male shouts and laughter from the town behind, old Springpole was wondering grimly just what he was going to say to that big driller out there on the Plains well, in the south end of the field. What could he say?

EVENTUALLY he came to the well. The last one on a line of derricks two miles long, spaced three hundred yards apart. The floor of the derrick was boarded in but he could see the walking beam rocking steadily, raising and lowering the tools on the end of the drilling line, hammering interminably away at the hard strata on the way down to the oil pay, three thousand feet below. The crew was there.

Springpole got out of his car and walked slowly into the derrick. Little Jim Canada, the driller, was standing by the hole, one hand on the cable, feeling the stroke of his tools.

"Why, howdy there, Springpole, yuh old hellion!" he greeted joyously. "Payin' us a social visit or—" Then something in old Springpole's face seemed to convey the ominous message that he brought and in mid-sentence the driller's cheerful voice stopped. His face changed, wondering.

"Poison Willis has kilt yore brother," said the old man grimly. "Somebody hadda come tell yuh. I reckoned it better be me."

The big driller stared at him. "Willis has killed—my—brother?" His voice seemed dazed, the words wide spaced. "You mean—he shot my brother? My brother—without a gun to his name?"

Old Springpole nodded. This was hard, harder even than he had expected. To have to tell Little Jim Canada, his friend, that a killer had murdered Big Jim, Little Jim's twin brother.

"Willis shot him," somehow Springpole found he could not meet those stricken eyes. "Willis, he shot him in Borger Jack Ransome's joint. Willis, he bumped into Jim and called him a

low-down name. Jim resents it. Then Poison, he jumps back and lets yore brother have it in the heart. He stands there and laughs at us and carves another notch on his damn gun, tellin' us it's Number Twelve and he wants just one more to filll the butt. Twelve notches! Yuh can't go ag'in a gun killer like that, Jim!"

The big driller's eyes were changing. Springpole stole a glance at him, saw his dark, stricken eyes go blank and then—the old driller shuddered inwardly and looked hurriedly away once more. It had seemed like a glimpse into the raging, smoky fires of hell, that look in Little Jim's eyes.

"He killed my brother," the big driller's voice was so utterly dead that Springpole looked quickly toward him in alarm. "He killed my brother—and my brother never carried a gun. I—"

"Jim!" old Springpole was thoroughly agitated. "Yuh can't, yuh know yuh can't stand ag'in him. He's a gunfighter. Yuh wouldn't have no more chance than a snowball in hell! He won't fight fair with his fists. He'll pull his rod and kill yuh—like that—they ain't nobody now livin' quick enough to beat him on the draw. Besides—he's the Law!"

IN HIS consternation Springpole had grasped the driller by the shoulders. Now he jerked back with a gasp. Little Jim Canada was laughing. Cold, horrible laughter, which had in it not the slightest element of mirth. Killer's laughter, such laughter as Springpole had heard only a few minutes before from Poison Willis. And in the big driller's eyes was the tortured, hellish flame of the abyss, the look that snarls over the barrels of roaring guns.

"He's got the twelfth notch and he wants Number Thirteen? All right. I'm gonna give him that Thirteenth Notch."

"But Jim, Jim—"

"Cut that! Springpole, see if I'm right. If I remember right, Willis wears his gun in a shoulder holster. He pulls it underhand. You've seen him do it twice. How does he do it?"

"Why, kinda like this," the old driller illustrated, his face bewildered. "It's in a spring clip holster and he goes after his gun so it looks like he's slow, but really he's lightnin' fast. It's a forty-four single action and he brings his hand up to his armpit this away and then he sorta flicks the gun straight out, so's the muzzle points at the floor fust and then jumps level and he fires. The gun is upside down or pretty near that when he shoots and he cocks her as he pulls her loose from the holster. He shoots thataway so's he won't th'ow off right or left, like he might if he swung the gun out and turned her right side up."

Little Jim nodded. "And like any gunman, he's got to have room to pull his gun," he added. "He steps back. All right, Springpole. Let's be going."

He paused to stop the walking beam, then turned toward the tool dresser, who had been listening in horrified silence. "Breck, it's prett' near midnight anyways. Shut her down and then go tell Clayton, Big Jim's been killed and he'll have to get another driller for the morning tower. He'll know what's happened to me before tomorrow noon."

He turned silently out of the derrick, just as he was, in his oil-soaked, khaki shirt, oil-stained, khaki breeches, laced boots battered hat. That there wasn't a sign of a weapon larger than a pocket knife on him anywhere was evident to the most casual eyes. Like his brother, Little Jim Canada never carried a gun. When he fought, he fought fair, with his bare hands.

Dubiously old Springpole Anderson climbed into the car seat after him and started the motor. Little Jim Canada was saying nothing but some terrific, compelling force seemed to be welling from him, bending old Springpole to his wishes despite the old man's solemn conviction that he was helping a virtually defenseless man to his death—no less.

But on the way into the boom town Little Jim began to talk, in a low, hard voice. Springpole tried to object, was overmastered, gave in. They came to Borger Jack Ransome's place, a barrel house as the field carelessly dubbed it, but in reality three establishments, saloon, gambling hell and dance hall, separate, but all under the same roof and the same management.

The boom town, of course, was still lively. Even more so just now, in fact, because the afternoon towers on the drilling wells, the men who worked from noon 'till midnight were just getting off and coming in, the morning crews just going out. Sulphur Creek never slept for that matter, never was completely quiet. Day and night it swarmed—and

around midnight was the wildest time.

With foreboding reluctance, Springpole Anderson followed Little Jim into the barrel house. The body of Big Jim had been removed but the bloodstains were still plain on the table where he had lain, despite an obviously recent and hasty scrubbing. The room was still thronged, but now with a new and different crowd for the most part, the men who worked from noon until midnight and who played from midnight until, perhaps, dawn. They were giving that wet, bloodstained table a wide berth.

LITTLE JIM CANADA walked straight over to it, stood there for a long minute, staring down at his brother's blood. The room of a sudden grew very quiet. Raising his head, he looked silently about him, recognizing faces of men he knew here and there, nodding to them. These big huskies, fellow oil workers, would give him as square a chance as they could, he knew.

Then he spoke, his voice curiously clear and harsh in the silence of the big room.

"I know there's plenty of damn pigeons and bootlickers in here. I want this to get to Poison Willis. I'm Little Jim Canada. Willis murdered my brother in here an hour ago and the damned coward shot him down when he knew my brother didn't have a gun on him, never carried one. I hear Willis bragged my brother was the twelfth notch on his gun and it needs only one more to fill the butt. Tell Willis I'm waiting for him right here to help him get that thirteenth notch. Tell him I said if he is entitled to twelve notches, then they're all men he's shot in the back or while they were unarmed, and I say he's a dirty yellow coward!"

There was a horrified, audible gasp from the crowd in the big room. That last thing Little Jim had said especially —the deadliest insult a man can hurl at a killer.

They stared at him. The big driller stood there, face very still, that tortured flame in his eyes. A fly came sweeping around his head, arm's length away. Incredibly rapid and precise, Canada's great hand licked up and out, caught and crushed the whirling insect between thumb and finger. There was something grimly significant in the action.

He sat down at the table, put his head in his hands. The room relaxed somewhat, into a sort of strained normalcy. Old Springpole Anderson began to circle quietly through the pack, whispering to oil workers here and there. Men began to come in and men began to go out, most of the outgoing men undoubtedly merely cautious gents who had no desires to stop any stray bullets as innocent bystanders. But some of them undoubtedly bootlickers headed straight for Willis with the news, just as Little Jim had expected them to.

Springpole Anderson disappeared in the direction of Borger Jack's office. Borger Jack objected to killings in his place naturally, but he had no love for the head John Law of the town, Poison Willis. Sulphur Creek was yet to hold its first election, choose its first city officials. Poison Willis, a brutal killer, had been hired as John Law by the townsite company promoting the town, simply because he was known and feared all over the Southwest.

He killed and got away with it because the aged sheriff of the county had been browbeaten by the townsite promoters into giving their hand-picked Police Chief a deputy sheriff's commission. With all their lots sold the townsite promoters now cared little how the town fared and Poison Willis was letting it run wide open—for fat shake downs of course from each and every house, operator, bootlegger, tin horn, painted lady. Borger Jack, being bled every week by Poison Willis, would waste no love on him.

ALONG, long wait—or so it seemed, though really it was hardly ten minutes. The noises of the boom town outside floating riotously in. The room queerly quiet, the crowd diminishing, although a considerable number of hardy, curious hombres actually were coming in.

There came a confused murmuring of voices outside, a peculiar whistle. Like a suddenly released spring Little Jim Canada came up from the table in a bounding whirl and went over against the wall, right beside the door. The door smashed open and with a gasp the crowd started shrinking back toward the walls. In the doorway was the head John Law, Poison Willis and behind him were three of his men.

He started in. Somebody in the crowd

tried to warn him and the hard fist of an oil worker came suddenly up and knocked that somebody cold. Poison Willis got just two steps inside the door, his men coming guardingly three or four feet behind him when, with a furious twist of his great shoulders Little Jim Canada slammed the door in their faces and at the same time plunged forward in a tigerish leap, knocking down Willis' arms, pinning them helpless in a crushing grip. From outside the door came old Springpole Anderson's loud, high-pitched voice.

"Yuh three guys! This here shotgun's fulla screws, nails and buckshot! Any one of yuh make one move and I'll let all three of yuh have it! Stand steady and grab stars!"

Inside, in the wide cleared space the crowd had immediately vacated for the fighters, Poison Willis was fighting ferociously, trying to break the crushing grip of those great arms. But the man on his back had him. He was helpless.

Slowly, Little Jim Canada worked around until he was breast to breast with his man, holding the killer's arm helpless, glaring into his face, their eyes not three inches apart. What Poison Willis must have seen in the big driller's eyes no one else could know but it must have been something horrible, for a spasm of fear passed across his face and he made a new, terrific effort to break free.

Somebody in the room made a furtive effort to get out a gun and help Willis by shooting Canada in the back. A big roustabout smashed a heavy beer bottle over that rat's head and the incident caused hardly a ripple in the crowd, so intent were they on the struggle before them.

Willis ceased to resist. He hung there in the driller's arms, his dark face poisonous with rage and hate. He was more than a little afraid. Then Little Jim Canada began to talk to him, in a low, terrible voice.

"Willis, you just murdered my brother in here when you knew he wasn't packin' a gun. You bragged he was the twelfth notch on your gun and you said you needed just one more to fill the butt. Well you damned killer, I'm unarmed. I'm gonna turn you loose and let you make a pass for yore gun!"

The rapid changes on the gunman's face were bewildering. First stark amazement, disbelief. Next dawning realization that the big driller actually meant to do what he said. Then exultation, killer's mirth. He threw back his head and laughed in the driller's face.

"You dirty hunky, you don't dare turn me loose! Turn me loose, I'll kill you and you know it! You got a lion by the tail —you can't hold on and you can't let go! I'm gonna gun you."

WHAT happened came so fast that the majority of those in the big room saw only the outstanding details. With a sudden, savage heave the driller crushed the gunman's body in against his chest, then sent him hurtling back toward the door. The killer, miraculously agile, kept his feet as he whirled back and his right hand moved toward the gun under his armpit, like a piece of precise machinery. Dark laughter was on his face. His hand reached the gun, jerked it free, cocked it as it came, started to swing out in that deadly direct underhand move.

But as it came the driller, having released his enemy and given him a fair chance, plunged forward. His right hand flicked out in that same incredibly rapid, precise gesture with which he had picked the fly from mid-air, flicked out, caught the gun barrel as it came up, and twisted. There was a flash, a roar, Willis screamed as the first bullet tore through his knee.

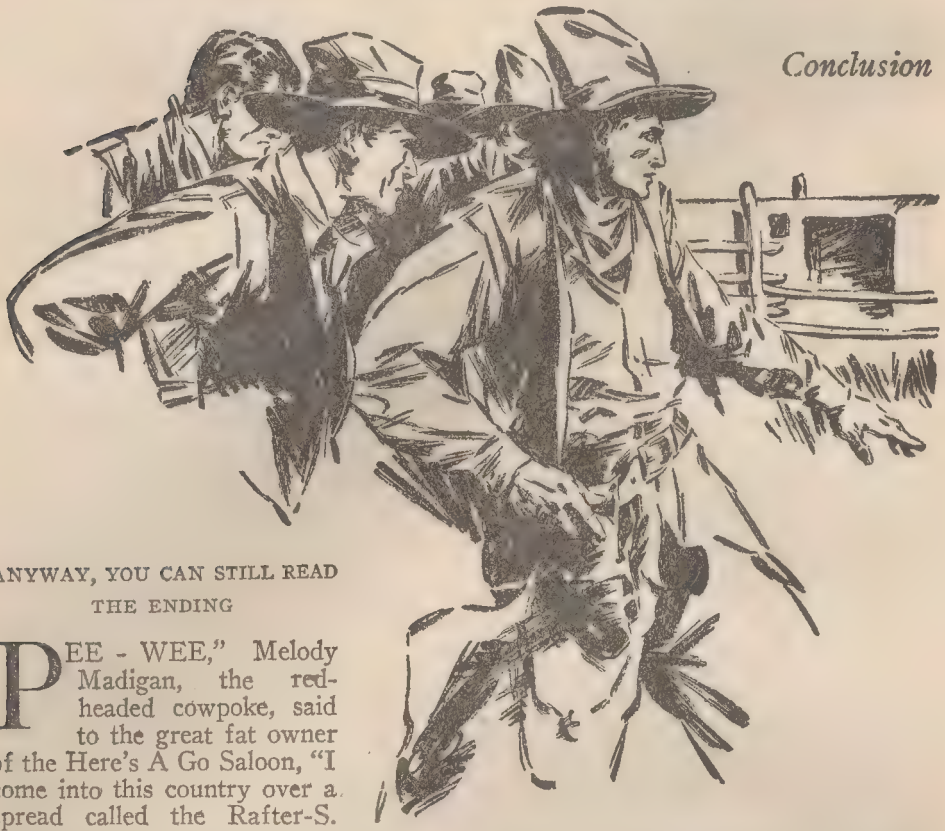
Still the pistol twisted around in the big driller's inexorable grasp, his other hand came in, cocking the hammer, crushing down over the gunman's fingers, there was a second flash, a roar, muffled this time and with a sobbing moan the murderer of Big Jim Canada went down, the second bullet clear through his body, just under the heart. He was dead when he hit the floor.

With a slow swing of his great shoulders, Little Jim Canada stepped back and turned. His left hand held the smoking pistol by the barrel, his right hand moved toward his pocket, came out with a pocketknife. There was a soft grating of a blade on wood, with a grim, mirthless smile Little Jim Canada held the pistol up so that all might see, then slowly, carelessly tossed it down on the body of the killer.

And once more the crowd gasped. Gasped as it caught the grim humor. Little Jim Canada had added the thirteenth notch, filling the butt.

Gun Justice

Conclusion



ANYWAY, YOU CAN STILL READ THE ENDING

"PEE - WEE," Melody Madigan, the red-headed cowpoke, said to the great fat owner of the Here's A Go Saloon, "I come into this country over a spread called the Rafter-S. Found a girl there, Jerry Norris, an' her daddy, Tom Norris, with a broken leg, throwin' some lead at Bull Badgely an' a guy called Manitoba. Pee-Wee, that girl's head is red, kinda like mine, so I'm buyin' chips in the game. What's the lay?"

"It'll be the death of me," said Pee-Wee, nervously. "It's them Du Sangs. Hugo Du Sang, he's chief, but his brothers, Guy and Luke, is as bad. Manitoba and Bull Badgely both work for the Du Sangs an' there are others as bad as them two out on the Diamond-8. There's been a lot of rustlin' round here last few years. An' it's been hittin' Tom Norris and his Rafter-S the worst. He's broke. An' the Du Sangs wants his ranch. Norris told 'em to go to hell. Since then the Du Sangs has been using strong-arm methods.

"An' the other ranchers won't do a thing?" Melody asked in surprise.

"Well, the other fellows is pretty far away," Pee-Wee explained. "There was a couple of detectives in here, though. One disappeared. The other shot himself—or that is what the sheriff said. Sheriff's a Du Sang man too."

"Who do you figger is the rustler?" Melody pursued.

"Du Sang," Pee-Wee said. "Who else?"

"I thought," said Melody.

Later, Melody had to kill Bull Badgely and get the drop on Hugo Du Sang himself. Du Sang warned the boy of the consequences of bucking him. But Melody laughed at him and that very night took a load of food out to the Rafter-S.

Old Tom Norris was so pleased with Melody's offer of help that he gave the cowboy an interest in the outfit, explaining, however, that Du Sang held an unrecorded mortgage over the ranch.

The next day back in town Melody set about getting more help. He hired Jug-Handle, a mysterious bum who had been hanging around Pee-Wee's saloon, and

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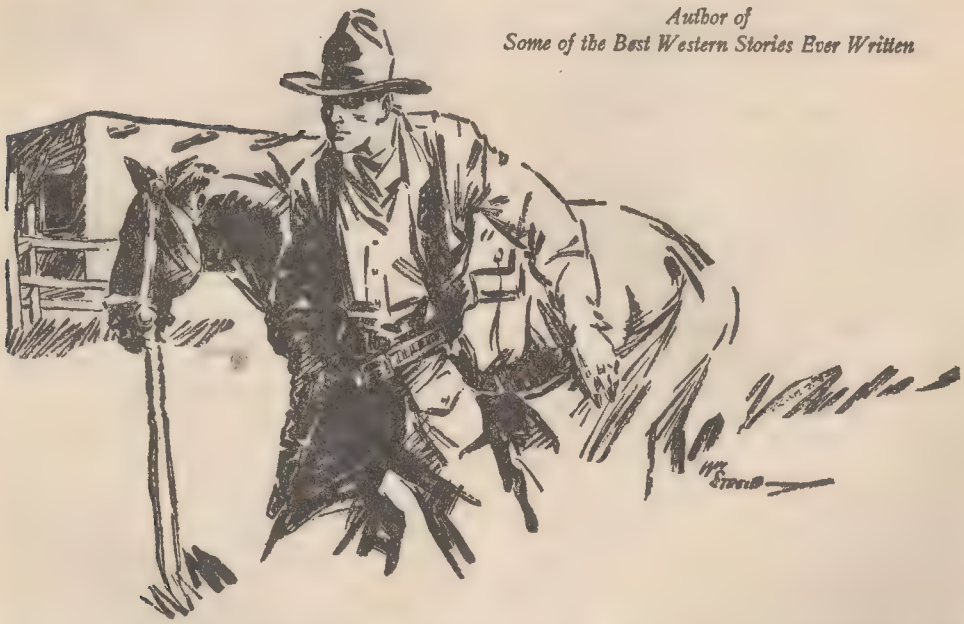
Some of the Best Western Stories Ever Written



Straight into the Diamond-8, Melody rides. There, surrounded by his enemies, confronted by Du Sang, he calls for a murderer to draw!

sent him out to the ranch with some stamp irons. Then he rode to the other friendly ranchers. On the way he met Guy and Luke Du Sang. They tried to ambush him but Melody sent them both home rather badly shot up. He got four men from the other ranches and then headed back for town.

On the edge of town Melody met his friend Pee-Wee, the fat owner of the Here's A Go Saloon. Pee-Wee was sweating freely and looked excited.

"Gosh, Melody," the fat man sputtered. "Don't go near the Here's A Go. Manitoba is waitin' there to get you the minute you step through the door."

Melody grinned. "Thanks, old-timer, for the tip," he said. "I won't be forgettin' it, but how did you get out to warn me without that gunman gettin' wise?"

"I told him I had a leaky whiskey barrel on the porch," Pee-Wee whispered, looking a little white. "Gosh, I hope he don't notice there ain't no barrel there—— That hombre is a killer. Don't go in there," he added when Melody started toward the Here's A Go.

"Yeah, I'm goin' in," Melody replied, still grinning, "In the back way."

Which he did and made a fool out of Manitoba.

But that night out at the ranch, word came to Melody that Pee-Wee had been murdered. Melody rushed to town and got there just before Pee-Wee died.

"Cowboy," the great saloon keeper gasped. "Anything I got is yours—I want you to have the Here's A Go."

"Who done it, old friend?" Melody urged. "Tell me, who done it?"

Manitoba—found out about the whiskey barrel—" Pee-Wee's voice was only a whisper "—but go after Du Sang first—don't worry about this—you'll win out—you gotta, cowboy, an' you can—" And holding his friend's hand Pee-Wee died.

Melody went wild. "I'm gunnin' for Manitoba," he snarled as he rushed towards his horse.

"Wait," Doc Kenyon called. "Don't be

a fool, cowboy. Manitoba is out at the Diamond-8. He's among friends, the Du Sangs. You won't have a chance."

"I'm gunnin' for Manitoba," Melody snapped, reining away, "on the Diamond-8!" And his laugh was unpleasant to hear as he rode madly away toward his enemy's ranch.

Chapter XVIII

GUNS OF VENGEANCE

EIGHT men sat about a long table eating breakfast in the mess room of the Diamond-8 ranch. Hugo Du Sang sat at the head of the table; to his right was Guy Du Sang, his right arm in a sling. Manitoba occupied a chair to Hugo's left. The other five were Fargo Phelps, Hub Wheeler, Tate Munson, Calico Worden and Squint Cantrell. Hard looking punchers, these five, fit employees for their crooked chief. Luke Du Sang was confined to his bed in the big, two-storied ranch house, some hundred-odd yards away from the mess shanty.

Hugo Du Sang spoke to the Chinese cook who shuffled about the table, refilling coffee cups. "Better fix up a tray for Luke, Chino, with the things Doc Kenyon ordered. And none of your damn' grease, mind. I'll take it up to the house when it's ready."

The Chinese cook smirked and bobbed, finished with the coffee-pot, and scuffed back to his kitchen to struggle with the intricacies of toast and beef broth.

"How's Luke feelin' this mornin'?" Tate Munson asked.

"Purty sore," Hugo answered. "He'll pull through, though. Already he's cravin' to cross guns with Madigan, again."

"Madigan's my meat," Guy Du Sang snapped. "Jest as soon as this arm heals—"

"Both of you better lay off'n Madigan," Hugo growled. "He'll be li'ble to finish you, next time."

"Aw, he ain't so much," Guy replied sullenly. "It was just that he took us by surprise, and my damn bronc wouldn't hold still. I shot before he did."

"The fact remains," Hugo pointed out, "that Madigan is still kickin' hell out of our game. I reckon I'll have to go after him, myself."

"Gimme a shot at him, chief," Fargo Phelps said hopefully.

His answer was a scornful laugh. "Hell! Fargo," Hugo sneered. "He'd be through rollin' his lead, before you knowed they was a fight. You all admit that Manitoba's the fastest gun workin' for me, and yet you saw how Manitoba fell down on the job."

"Yeah, more surprises," snickered Calico Worden. "Manitoba, you must'a' looked plumb comical waitin' for him at the front door, and him standin' behind you all the time."

"That'll be enough from you, Calico," Manitoba said peevishly. "If it hadn't been for that damn' Pee-Wee, our troubles would be over. But Pee-Wee won't butt in on our game no more."

Hugo Du Sang looked a trifle concerned. "I'll feel a hell of a lot better when we get some news from town," he said slowly. "You're sure nobody didn't recognize you, eh, Manitoba? With Higley showin' a yellow streak, like you said, I won't be able to fix nothin', if they was any witnesses."

"Well, what the hell!" Manitoba blustered. "It was a fair fight. I've told you a dozen times. Everythin' was just like I said. I got a good alibi with Higley, too. Told him I was ridin'. He saw me leave town. Then I circled back and come in the back way of the Here's A Go. I accused Pee-Wee of warnin' Madigan, and he saw they wa'n't no use to deny it. Instead, he reaches for his gun. I beat him to the draw, that was all. Then, I high-tailed it outta town."

"No chance of Pee-Wee livin' long enough to tell who done it, eh?" Hub Wheeler speculated.

Manitoba directed one contemptuous glance at the speaker. "When you've thrun as much lead as I have, Hub, you'll know how to finish your man pronto. Hell! I'm bettin' Pee-Wee was croaked before he hit the floor." He scowled uneasily. "What the devil is all the fussin' about, anyhow? What if they do find out I done it? Even if Hugo can't fix it, and Higley arrests me, what of it? They ain't got nothin' on me. Ain't I told you it was a fair fight? No jury's going to convict a man that shoots in self-defense. It was Pee-Wee or me."

FARGO PHELPS looked dubious. "Mebbe it's just as you say, Manitoba, but I never knew Pee-Wee to pack a gun."

"He never wore it, but he always kept a gun on the shelf under his bar," Squint Cantrell put in.

"I dunno where his gun was," Manitoba lied sulkily, "but when I see him reachin' for it, I plugged him. Heard it fall on the floor. You hombres gimme a pain. It's me that rubbed him out, and if you ain't willing to back me up in case of trouble, you can go to hell! Nobody's got anythin' on me."

"You don't understand, feller," Hugo said quickly. "We'll be backin' you up, all right. Just let Higley, or anybody else, try to take you away from here. We're all in this thing too deep to throw down a pal. I wa'n't meanin' to doubt your word, Manitoba, only I wanted to get all the facts clear in my mind. I'm believin' every word you said. Hell! Why wouldn't I?"

"Yeah, why in hell wouldn't you?" Manitoba snapped. "You better stick to me, 'cause it looks like hell would break loose around here before long. Them two fellers ridin' with Madigan, when I first see him yesterday mornin', was headin' for the Rafter-S."

Squint Cantrell nodded. "I see 'em ride in when I was spyin' on that outfit, like Hugo ordered. And there was two other hombres there, too. I wa'n't close enough to recognize any of 'em, but I'll bet a mess of hop-toads that Madigan borrowed 'em from the Slash-O and Lazy-V, just like you heard him talkin' it over with Jug-Handle, Hugo. And that Jug-Handle hobo is ridin' for the Rafter-S, too."

"We got a fight ahead, all right," Hugo nodded, "but I'll get the Rafter-S, if it's the last thing I do. We'll raid 'em some night when they least expect it, then we'll see how much chance Norris will have to pay off that mortgage. I gotta have water, that's all. And I'll get the remainder of his stock, too."

"Trouble is," Guy Du Sang put in, "you didn't go about things right, Hugo. You should have let me go visitin' that daughter of Norris'. Once she got sweet on me, you could do just about what you want."

Hugo scowled. "Dammit, Guy, I've told you a hundred times that gal ain't your kind. She's the sort that wants to marry the feller she gets stuck on. Trouble with you is, you think every woman you look at is goin' to get mashed on you."

"We could 'a' fixed up a fake marriage of some kind—" Guy commenced.

"You make me tired," Hugo snapped. "I ain't got no morals when it comes to fightin' men, but I ain't never yet descended to pullin' a dirty trick like that on a gal, and I don't intend to start now. That's just the sort of thing that'd turn the whole country against us, and the last few days we ain't been so popular in Vaca Wells. You just leave things to me, and we'll come out on top of the heap. The first thing we gotta do is get rid of Madigan. After that, things will commence runnin' on the old tracks again."

"I'll get rid of Madigan, myself," Manitoba announced abruptly. "This outfit has stood just about enough from that red-headed—"

"Yaah!" Guy Du Sang spat scornfully. "How you goin' to do it, Manitoba? You're great at runnin' off at the head about what you're goin' to do, but that's as far as it goes. You've had two chances and you flopped both times—"

"You didn't show up so good, yourself," Manitoba flared. "You and Luke both must 'a' been asleep to let that waddy run ragged over you the way he did."

Guy's face crimsoned. "I pulled my iron on him, anyhow, which is more than you can say, the first day you'n him met—"

"Yeah, and if you'd had my speed, you'd have got him," Manitoba retorted hotly. "Damn you, Guy! I'll—" He leaped from his seat and started around the table.

Hugo jumped to his feet and pushed Manitoba back. "A fine pair you two are," he growled, "to start a fight at a time like this, when I need every man. Sit down! Keep your traps shut, do you hear? I'm runnin' this spread, and don't you two forget it. I'm doin' the thinkin' for the outfit, too. When there's fightin' to be done, I'll let you know. Think that over."

GUY and Manitoba subsided into a sullen silence. The rest of the crew finished breakfast with little conversation. Chairs were pushed back, there came a scraping of booted feet, and the men filed outside. Singly, and in twos, they crossed the ranch yard toward the bunkhouse. A couple of men entered the building, and reappeared in a minute to flop down on the long bench outside the door. The others gathered around, some on the bench, some squatting on their heels before the others.

Chino appeared with an old tin beer tray upon which he carried Luke's breakfast. He gave it into Hugo's hands. Guy accompanied Hugo up to the ranch house. Halfway there, Hugo turned and called to the group in front of the bunkhouse, "I'll outline the day's work when I come back. Meanwhile, you hombres see that your guns is in workin' order, in case we decide to go visitin'."

This caused much speculation and considerable conversation. Two of the men who had not yet buckled on their guns, entered the bunkhouse to get them. One man procured oil and rags and proceeded to clean his forty-five.

AN HOUR passed while the sun climbed higher above the eastern horizon. Hugo and Guy had joined the others before the bunkhouse. "I was kinda thinkin' mebbe we'd call on Norris," Hugo commenced, "but on second thought that can wait. We gotta get Madigan outta the way, first. I wish I could think of a way to get him away from his crew. I might send him word that he's skeered to meet me in Vaca Wells and shoot it out—"

"Somebody comin'," Hub Wheeler announced suddenly. His pointing arm directed attention to a scurrying cloud of dust that moved rapidly along the trail that led to town.

"An' comin' plumb fast," Calico Worden added.

Hugo raised one hand to shield his eyes from the rays of the early morning sun, looked steadily at the approaching horseman, Finally, he lowered his arm. "Doc Kenyon ain't due out here until this afternoon, so it can't be him. He wouldn't be ridin' like that, anyway. He knows Luke ain't in no danger. I can't think of only one man it might be, and that's Big Foot Higley. Mebbe Higley's got his nerve back, and is comin' to square hisself with me. Damn his hide. I'll give him whatfor, when he gets here. Yeller coyote! I can stand anythin' but a hombre that ain't got guts."

"That may be Higley," Tate Munson pointed out, "but I doubt it. Higley ain't got no hawss that'll rip off miles thataway, and he can't ride like that hombre, neither. 'Tain't Higley."

"Naw, that ain't Higley," Calico Worden agreed a minute later. "Different build from Higley."

The men watched the approaching rider with interest. He came nearer. Suddenly, a curse was torn from Guy Du Sang's lips. "Madigan!" he exclaimed. "That's who 'tis—Madigan!"

"By Gawd, you're right!" Manitoba burst out a minute later. "Wonder what he wants."

"I dunno, and I don't give a damn!" Guy grated. "I only know what I'm goin' to do when he gets here." He reached his left hand to holster and procured his Colt-gun.

Manitoba was quick to catch the idea. He, too, drew his six-shooter. "Guy, you lay off," he warned. "That Madigan hombre is my meat."

"You'll both put them hawg-laigs away!" Hugo roared. "I want to see what Madigan wants. Go on, put 'em away, before I bust you over the conk!"

Reluctantly, the two sheathed their weapons, although Manitoba's hand hovered near his holster, ready for a quick draw. He was commencing to suspect, now, the reason that brought Madigan to the Diamond-8. "Damn him!" he grated. "I bet he's guessed that I killed Pee-Wee, and he's comin' to see whether I'll admit it."

Hugo nodded quickly. "You're probably right. Well, we'll bluff him out. Tell him we don't know nothin' about that. After——"

He didn't finish the sentence, but the very silence held a meaning for the men. No one spoke for several minutes. Without checking his pony in the slightest, Madigan swept the sure-footed little beast around the turn in the road and came plunging into the ranch yard.

The men got to their feet as he approached, prepared to scatter. For a moment it looked as though he intended to run them down. Suddenly, he jerked the sweat-streaked, foam-flecked Jezebel back to haunches, some fifteen feet from the waiting crew.

"You wantin' somethin', Madigan?" Hugo demanded, as Melody made no move to dismount.

Melody's gaze rested a moment on Du Sang, then swiftly ran over the others until it came to Manitoba. There it stopped, his eyes narrowed to thin slits. For the first time he spoke.

"I thought a heap of Pee-Wee, Manitoba," he said.

His voice was flat, emotionless, though it carried a deadly quality the others weren't missing. They stared at him with-

out sound, something of awe creeping into their faces as they noticed how Manitoba seemed to shrivel before the red anger that burned in Melody's narrowed eyes.

STARK fear had entered Manitoba's heart. He remembered the first day he met Madigan, the prickly sensation that had coursed his spine lifting the hair at the back of his neck. The man opened his mouth to shout denial of his guilt, but the words wouldn't come. He realized, now, that denial would be useless. Finally, his gaze dropped before Madigan's.

The others stood like granite statues. For all the attention Melody paid them, they might not have been there. He slipped quickly from his horse, and advanced two paces nearer Manitoba.

Something pleading in his voice, now: "Ain't you ever goin' to fill your hand, Manitoba? I'm givin' you more chance than you give Pee-Wee. You got your guns. His was loaned, and you knew he didn't have none."

Manitoba couldn't answer. Silence, save for the strained breathing of the men. Melody's eyes blazed like furies incarnate, but his voice came strangely steady.

"Look at me, snake. I'm givin' you your chance." Suddenly, he threw both arms high in the air, and for the first time his pent up rage burth forth. "Damn you, Manitoba, draw your irons!"

Manitoba raised his eyes, and could scarcely believe the sight they beheld—Madigan, standing near hands well above his head!

Like a cornered rat, Manitoba moved into action, reached to holsters. Maybe fright slowed his movements; something prevented his usual, swift shooting.

His talon-like claws had not yet touched gun-butts, when Madigan's hands swooped down. The guns in his holsters seemed to leap to meet his eager palms. The two guns streaked up—out! Madigan commenced thumbing his lead the instant the muzzles cleared leather!

Two slugs kicked up the dust at Manitoba's feet, before the twin barrels cut swift arcs upward to find Manitoba's range. The next shots found his body—and so the next!

Guns half out of holsters, Manitoba paused abruptly. Then, he completed the draw, but it came too late. His body stiffened, pulling him to tip-toes. He turned half around, then pitched forward in a huddled heap on the earth, convulsive muscular action working triggers and sending shot after shot ripping harmlessly across the ranch yard!

Quite suddenly his fingers ceased moving and he lay still. A look of grim satisfaction flitted across Melody's face. For the first time he seemed to realize the presence of the other Diamond-8 men. He backed slowly toward his horse, guns covering Hugo and the rest. His voice came through the smoke that curled from his muzzles.

"I thought a heap of Pee-Wee," he said again.

The others appeared to be too stunned by the outcome of the shooting to reach for their forty-fives, or even to speak.

Hugo finally found his voice, "We didn't know it was that way, Madigan," he said slowly. "Manitoba told us it was a fair fight. Go on, kid, climb on your bronc. Nobody's goin' to throw down on you. Me, I can stand anythin' but a hombre without guts, and you got plenty! I recognize nerve when I see it, and you deserve a square deal. I'd like to shake your hand, but I know you wouldn't do it."

"I couldn't, Du Sang," Melody said steadily. "You'n me don't ride the same sort of a range—an' that means war. Howsomever, I'm recognizin' what you're doin' and I'm appreciatin' it."

"That's whatever," Du Sang stated coldly. "Next time we meet, start smokin' your guns. You won't get a second chance."

Melody nodded shortly, turned his back on the group, climbed to the saddle. "You can't come shootin' too fast to suit me, Du Sang," he challenged.

Without another word, he wheeled Jezebel, and loped her out of the yard. The instant his back was turned, Guy Du Sang reached to holster. With an angry oath, Hugo leaped to his brother's side, wrested the gun from Guy's grasp.

"You fool!" Guy raged. "You've made us miss the best chance we'll ever get at that hombre."

Hugo didn't answer for a moment. None of the others had made an attempt to draw. He glanced down at the lifeless body of Manitoba, and Hugo's lip curled with contempt. Then his eyes strayed to the swiftly-moving rider, ripping plumes of dust from the trail.

After a time he gave a short affirmative nod. "I reckon you're right, Guy," he admitted a trifle sheepishly. "We've missed the best chance we ever had at Madigan. But, somehow, I just couldn't do it. I sure admire his nerve. But we'll have to get him quick, before I get to likin' that damn' red-head too much!"

CHAPTER XIX

JUG-HANDLE GETS EVIDENCE

TEN days passed. Under Melody's capable supervision, the Rafter-S was fast getting back into shape. His first move had been to put Matt Oliver and Clem Osborne to work branding the stock already in the valley with the new stamp-irons. Norris helped with the fires. While this was going on, Melody, Jug-Handle, Tennessee Lee and Mesquite Farrell were combing the hills and ravines west of the house, at the foot of the Trozar Mountains.

Here they found a considerable number of stock that had strayed away, or been overlooked in the roundups of past seasons. Some of these renegades hadn't seen a man, nor horse, for some time and were pretty wild, but most of them had been branded with the Rafter-S mark at one time or another. Each night the punchers rode in driving before them small bunches of cows which, the following day, felt the burn of Oliver's and Osborne's stamp-irons.

The days since the shooting of Manitoba hadn't carried any events of great interest. Pee-Wee had been buried in the Vaca Wells cemetery, and his funeral attended by nearly everyone for miles around. The town had awakened the morning after the funeral to find that Sheriff Big Foot Higley had abruptly left town leaving a note of resignation on his desk. Plainly Higley had seen the writing on the wall.

For the time being the town was without a law officer, and Melody expected every day to see the Diamond-8 outfit break loose with further villainies, but nothing of the sort took place. Evidently, Hugo Du Sang was biding his time. Meantime, the herd of Rafter-S stock in the valley was nearing favorable proportions.

Although still unable to ride a horse, Tom Norris was proving to be an excellent cook. He prepared all of the meals for the outfit. Jerry, though she appeared evenings in a dress of green-checked gingham, always donned her overalls each morning and, mounting, did her part with the men.

Usually she rode at Melody's side. The two were seeing a lot of each other these days. Jerry was deciding that the cowboy wore well. As for Melody, well, he'd fallen into a habit of blushing every time the girl's name was mentioned in his presence. All of which was rather unusual for Melody.

IT HAPPENED when they were least expecting it. Melody and Jerry were riding toward the Rafter-S one afternoon toward sundown. They hadn't been able to uncover a single cow that day. As Melody had said, "I reckon we've got all of 'em. Them hills an' draws has been combed plenty."

The two had dipped down into a hollow that lay about three miles back of the Rafter-S ranch house. Melody had dismounted to tighten his cinch which had worked loose. The girl had also dropped to the ground and stood near, watching him.

Melody straightened from the horse, turned to the girl. In that instant something took place within the breasts of both. Jerry's hat was off, and the setting sun was picking out spots of gold in her finely spun hair. The bronze highlights caught Melody's eyes for a moment, drew him on. He stepped forward, then checked himself, his gaze dropping a bit to meet Jerry's. Quite suddenly he realized her arms were lifting to him.

His own arms went around her. For a time neither spoke. Words weren't needed at a time like this. Their heads came closer together, as his lips closed on the girl's. A long, long silence . . . and sunshine. The two horses strayed off a short distance and commenced to crop grass. Neither the man nor the girl noticed them. The world had ceased revolving, and all things seemed to stand still in the consummation of that happy moment.

Her face flushed, Jerry finally stepped back. Melody found his tongue, "Oh geegosh, oh geegosh," he repeated over and over. "Oh, geegosh, girl, I didn't know that was a-goin' to happen. Gee! Do you really feel thataway, too?"

Again the girl came close, her lips lightly brushing his. "Cowboy," she laughed softly, dropping into the ver-

nacular of the range, "ain't you always said us red-heads has gotta stick together. Me, I'm only takin' you at your word."

Melody eyed her in silence, almost unbelieving the wonder of it all. Then he grinned. "C'mon," he drawled, "let's do it some more. I've just discovered that you're plumb kissable." And she was, too.

It was some time later that he caught up the horses. They mounted and finished the journey to the Rafter-S, riding slowly, stirrup to stirrup.

The men were just sitting down to supper when Melody and the girl arrived. All were there except Clem Osborne, who had gone to Vaca Wells that day for some needed supplies.

Jerry and Melody took their places at the table. Tom Norris looked at the two for a few seconds, then chuckled, "I was kinda worryin' when you two didn't arrive," he said, "but I can see, now, that I was just wastin' my time."

Melody crammed a forkful of food into his mouth. "We had important business," he announced.

"Awfully important," Jerry added steadily. Her checks were tinged with pink as she said the words.

Tom Norris' leathery face crinkled to a grin. He glanced at the smiling faces of the men, then back to his daughter and Melody. "We all been sorta wonderin' when you two would decide," he laughed. "We could see it comin' on your younkers, day by day." He rounded the table, hand outstretched to Melody, "Congrats, son, I don't know nobody I'd sooner see marry Jerry."

Melody stood up and seized the proffered hand. "I'm statin' to the word in general," he smiled happily, "that I'm one lucky cowpoke!"

The other men burst into cheers. "Goin' to have a weddin', goin' to have a weddin', goin' to have a weddin' mighty soon," Mesquite Farrell sang loudly. They all crowded around to shake hands with Melody and the girl.

IN THE midst of the uproar, Clem Osborne arrived. He gave vent to a wild cowboy yell when he learned the news, and swung around to Tennessee Lee, "you can pay me, Tenn," he exclaimed. "I win."

"Reckon you-all do," Lee admitted sheepishly. He put his hand in his pocket and drew out some money which he passed across to Osborne.

"What's all the bettin' about?" Melody queried.

Osborne explained. "M'en Tennessee been makin' a bet on how long you two would hold out," he told Jerry and Melody. "Tenn said you wouldn't come to no arrangement until after the trouble with the Diamond-8 was over. I been allowin' you two kids couldn't wait that long. You see, I was a youngster once, myself, and I know. Tenn, here, he's still a youngster and ain't got the mellow wisdom that comes with years."

"He ain't got no wisdom a-tall," Mesquite Farrell wailed. "Part of them bucks he lost was mine. I told him not to make no such bets."

"'S'all right, Mesquite," Matt Oliver grinned complacently. "Clem was bettin' my money along with his own. I happen to be on the winnin' end while you're on the losin', that's all. That's the only difference between you'n me."

Jug-Handle laughed softly. 'There's two things what nobody can't ever dope out," he said, "an' therefore makes plumb risky objects to bet on."

"What's that?" Jerry wanted to know.

"A cowpunch that's in love," Jug-Handle answered.

"You said *two* things," Melody reminded. "What's the other?"

"The girl he's in love with, of course, Jug-Handle replied.

The laughter died down after a time, and Clem Osborne gave the group the news while he ate his supper. The others sat at the table in the kitchen of the ranch house, smoking cigarettes and listening.

"There been an upheaval on the Diamond-8," Osborne announced. "Just before I pulled outta Vaca Wells, the whole crew rode in. They allowed as they was sick of workin' for the Du Sang brothers and had quit in a body."

"That leaves the Du Sangs there alone, don't it?" Mesquite Farrell asked. "Shucks! I was hopin we'd be able to ride over there one of these days and trade some lead with that outfit."

Tom Norris considered. "Looks like Hugo Du Sang's men was gettin' cold feet."

Melody said nothing except, "Du Sang is due for a reckonin' right soon. Seems like the sun is commencin' to shine on our range for a change."

The matter was discussed for some time, then Osborne released his second piece of news. "Melody," he asked, "what you aimin' to do with that saloon Pee-Wee left you?"

Melody frowned. "Danged if I know," he replied slowly. "I ain't got no hankerin' to run a bar."

"Oh, Lord," groaned Mesquite Farrell, "He owns a saloon and don't know what to do with it." He turned to Tennessee with mock seriousness, "Think of it, Tenn. He owns plenty liquor, an'—"

"Where you're concerned, Mesquite," Lee drawled, "they ain't no such thing as *plenty* liquor."

"Aw-w," Mesquite protested, red-faced. "I don't drink as much as you do, you slab-sided, cow-hocked excuse for a cow-nurse."

"Yes," Jerry laughed, "you two boys are terrible drunkards, aren't you? To hear you talk, a person would think you were both ready to take the cure, or something. As a matter of fact, I don't think either of you has had a drink since you've been on the Rafter-S."

"That's true, Matt Oliver said darkly, "an' somethin' oughta to be done about it, before Tenn and Mesquite run amuck. When they get that turrible cravin' for sarsaprilly water, there ain't no controllin' 'em."

"Mebbe the Here's A Go should be opened again," Melody continued, when the laughter had subsided. "but I'm darned if I can see my way clear to doin' it. Why, you askin', Clem?"

"Talked to a feller in Vaca Wells, today," Osborne explained. "He's a newcomer in town and is lookin' for a location to open a saloon. Seems like a square shooter. He was askin' about the Here's A Go, and is willin' to pay cash. I told him I'd tell you, and you could ride in and talk to him."

MELODY considered. "Not a bad idea, at that," he nodded after a time. "Tom has suggested a partnership to me, and I could use the money to pay for—"

"You've more than paid, Melody, for any share you get in the Rafter-S," Norris broke in.

"Well, we'll give it a thought later," Melody concluded. "I think if Pee-Wee was alive, he'd take to the idea."

The talk turned to ranch matters. Matt Oliver had brought in two strays that day; the others had returned empty-handed. "I reckon we've covered the range pretty thorough," Melody said. "An' we've built a nice little herd in the valley. Now that we know what you got, Tom, I want to look at your tally book, and see just what's been rustled. Then we can put certain propositions up to the Diamond-8."

Jug-Handle had left the room and gone outside while the men talked. Now he returned, bearing in one hand a small roll of green cowhide.

"Osborne bringin' news about the Diamond-8 crew quittin'," he commenced, "explains why I didn't see no riders on that range this afternoon—"

Melody's eyes widened a trifle. "Were you ridin' the Du Sang holdin's, today?" he demanded in surprise.

Jug-Handle nodded. "Yeah, lookin' over their stock a mite. When I found a cow that looked likely, I shot it and skinned out the brand. Give a look at this."

Dishes were pushed back. Jug-Handle unrolled the portion of hide and exposed the hairy side to the gaze of the group about the table. "To all appearances," he said, "this is from a Diamond-8 cow. As a matter of fact, that's a blotted brand. It used to be a Rafter-S."

He turned the piece of hide over to show the inner side. There, as plain as day, could be seen the original Rafter-S brand, with the Diamond-8 design joining it. The underside of the hide told the story, as it showed clearly where the lines of the bogus brand joined the old.

"There's your evidence," Jug-Handle said simply. Due to Jerry's presence, the men checked the oaths that rose to their lips. " 'Course we all been sure that Du Sang was stealin' our cows," Jug-Handle continued, "but we needed actual proof to produce in court."

"And you had plenty nerve," Melody said admiringly, "to ride over on Diamond-8 range and shoot a cow that was supposed to belong to that outfit."

"Aw, that wa'n't nothin'," Jug-Handle protested. "You see, none of the crew was ridin' today. As Osborne told you, they'd quit."

"But you didn't know that when you went over there," Melody pointed out. "You got a vote of thanks comin' to you."

"Dang it all," Tom Norris said,

"Sheriff Higley leavin' town, like he did, sorta puts us in a hole. If he was on the job, we could make him ride over and put this matter up to Du Sang. Seems to me Vaca Wells oughta get busy and elect another sheriff."

JUG-HANDLE laughed shortly. "I reckon we don't need to worry about gettin' authority to handle Du Sang," he said. "There ain't no use of me keepin' it secret no longer. My name's Jugandel, and I'm an operative for the Artexico Cattlemen's Association. Melody has been suspecting it right along."

"Well, I'll be everlastingly goldarned!" Tom Norris exploded. "A cattle detective! Thought it was danged funny the Association didn't send another man down, when that last one got killed."

Similar exclamations of surprise echoed through the room. "Gosh!" Melody said after a time, "it's goin' to be danged hard to give up callin' you Jug-Handle, now that we got used to that name."

"It fits all right," Jugandel replied. "Nickname of mine. I figured it would be good to use when I come down here in that tramp disguise. I'm hopin' before this business is finished, to get Du Sang to admit that the Diamond-8 was responsible for the death of our other operative."

"So long as you're the law around here," Norris said, "I'm cravin' to know when you aim to move on the Diamond-8 and get things settled."

"With this piece of hide for evidence," Jugandel replied, "there ain't no use of us waitin' no longer. I figure we'll all ride over to the Diamond-8 in the morning. Then I'll arrest the three Du Sangs, and we'll get the law to workin' on 'em."

"Shucks!" from Mesquite Farrell. "I was hopin' there'd be a fight. Darn you dyspeptics—I mean detectives—anyhow. You spoil all the fun."

The men gradually arose from the table and drifted down to the bunkhouse. Only Jugandel, Melody, Norris and Jerry remained in the kitchen.

At Melody's request, Norris produced the Rafter-S tally book. While the three men were looking over its pages, Jerry commenced washing the dishes.

From time to time, Melody jotted down lead pencil figures on a sheet of writing-tablet paper. Once he asked Norris the amount still due on the Rafter-S mortgage. Norris gave it to him.

Finally, Melody, after considerable calculating, raised his head from the figures before him. "It looks to me, Tom," he said, "as though your mortgage would have been paid up by this time, if Du Sang hadn't been stealin' you blind."

"My idea exact," Norris agreed.

"Did you figure the usual stock losses?" Jugandel asked.

Melody nodded. "Figured a certain loss for each year, and the natural percentage of increase, too. I got a pretty fair idea of what beef has been bringin' the past few seasons. I even deducted the wages Tom would have paid out, if he'd had a full crew working for him right along, and anyway you look at it, there should have been enough money come in to have paid off that mortgage."

"Well, we'll settle with Du Sang tomorrow mornin'," Jugandel promised.

"I forgot to mention it, before," Norris put in, "but George Vaugh and Buck Kirby rode over to see me, today."

"Wantin' anythin' in particular?" Melody asked.

Norris shook his head. "Mostly, they said they come to apologize for not gettin' in touch with me long before this. Said if I wanted any more men, I could have 'em. Darn nice hombres, both of 'em. I was just wonderin' if mebbe we oughta get a coupla more cowpokes if we're goin' callin' on the Diamond-8 in the mornin'."

"I don't reckon so," from Jugandel. "You see, there's just the three Du Sangs left there, now—and two of them is crippled."

"Sure enough," Norris responded. "I'd forgot about the crew pullin' freight."

Jugandel left to go to the bunkhouse after a time. Jerry finished with the dishes, and she and Melody went out to sit in front of the house. They confessed to a desire to watch the moon rise, but Tom Norris didn't wholly believe them. As he, himself, said, "Bein' as I ain't interested none in astronomy an' such, I reckon I'll turn in. Goin' to try and hairpin a bronc in the mornin', so I can make that ride to the Diamond-8 with you boys. Right now I'm bettin' a stack of blues that two moons could rise, and you younkers wouldn't see either one of 'em, half the time!"

Which, after all, was more or less true.

THE bunkhouse was dark by the time Jerry and Melody arose from their seats on the ranch house porch. Melody entered the house a minute to get his guns which he had left in the kitchen, then reluctantly said goodnight to the girl and bent his steps toward the bunkhouse.

When nearly to the building, he swung over toward the corral. Taking his rig from the top bar where he had left it, he entered the enclosure and proceeded to saddle Jezebel. Then he led the mare out, and left her standing a short distance from the bunkhouse.

Now he was forced to proceed with more caution. He entered the bunkhouse, listened carefully, and detected five distinct snores. All of the men were asleep, including Jugandel. Melody scratched a match and looked quickly about the room. One of the sleepers stirred uneasily. The match was quickly extinguished, but Melody had seen what he was searching for. Moving on tip-toe across the room, he picked from a table the skinned-out roll of cowhide bearing the blotted Rafter-S brand and silently vanished through the door.

Five minutes later Jezebel was carrying him with swift ground-covering strides, across the range toward the Diamond-8.

Chapter XX

MELODY CORNERS THE DU SANGS

IT WAS well past midnight when Melody splashed across the shallow Latigo River, and turned the little mare on a course that bore slightly to the southwest. It would be a matter of another six or seven miles before he reached the Du Sang ranch.

The earth unrolled swiftly beneath Jezebel's flying hoofs. Once, Melody drew out his guns, one after the other, and examined them with a grunt of satisfaction. Then he replaced them in holsters.

Finally, topping a rise of ground, he glimpsed some distance down the slope the blocky outlines of the Diamond-8 adobe buildings. On a lower floor of the two-story ranch house a lamp shone from one window. Melody checked the mare to a walk and proceeded more slowly. When nearly to the house, he guided Jezebel toward a small clump of cottonwoods. Here he dismounted and tossing the reins over a lower branch, finished the journey on foot.

Arriving before the house, he paused a moment to slip off his boots, then in sock feet, made his way up to the building and cautiously entered by the front door which happened to be open. Like a shadow the cowboy flitted inside, and found himself in a large room, which was dark. Across the room was a second doorway through which came light and voices.

Moving with cat-like tread, Melody slipped softly across the floor and took up a stand to one side of the doorway. Guy and Hugo Du Sang were talking.

"—and you got some scheme brewin'," Hugo was saying. "I saw you talking to the men before they left. It's all right for you to say that you thought you'd give them a chance to get a drink, but I figure there's more to it than that."

"All right, I'll tell you," Guy said. "Mebbe you'll be sore, and mebbe you won't, but I give the men certain orders, and told them they come from you."

"You gotta heap of nerve," Hugo growled. "What was them orders?"

Guy explained. "I told the boys to ride into Vaca Wells and spread the news that they'd had a fight with us and was quittin'. They'll hang around town for a spell, then pull out—all of 'em ridin' east, like they was gettin' out of the country—"

"A hell of an order to give, when we may be needin' a full force at any time," Hugo rasped.

"Wait a minute. Once outta sight of Vaca Wells, they'll swing wide and come back here. They oughta be comin' pretty soon."

"You don't know that gang like I do," Hugo laughed scornfully. "They'll probably all get drunk and come back when they feel like it."

"They'll be back before mornin', anyhow. Tomorrow afternoon they can lie out in the brush, back of the Rafter-S, and pick off Madigan and his men when they come ridin' in at night. That outfit is combin' the hills for stock, and they never come in in a bunch. The boys'll be able to ambush 'em one at a time. It might be a good ideal to kill off Norris first, while he's alone—"

"Well, you damn fool!" came Hugo's angry voice. "What's the idea of startin' a game like this without me knowin' it?"

"I figured you might buck the scheme," Guy said bitterly, "but dammit, Hugo, this outfit is as much mine as yours. It's time I had a say in the runnin' of it. Your ideas ain't worked worth a hoot in hell, and that Madigan hombre has got things pretty much his own way. It's our last chance, unless you got somethin' better to offer. The boys will see you, before they head for the Rafter-S, so if you don't want 'em to go, you can stop 'em. If you got a better idea, say so."

"I ain't," Hugo growled admission, "but I ain't stuck on yours, neither."

"Well, we gotta have some action purty quick," Guy said sullenly.

FOR a few moments the talk wasn't resumed. Melody heard the clink of glasses against a bottle, then a smacking of lips. He edged forward and peered cautiously around the doorway.

It was a room of considerable size with, at the opposite side, a second doorway that opened to the back of the house. To the right was a flight of wooden stairs that led to the upper floor, and at the other side of the room was a cot upon which lay Luke Du Sang, covered with blankets. The upper part of Luke's body was swathed in bandages and he appeared to be asleep.

At a table in the center of the room sat Guy and Hugo, with a bottle of whiskey between them. Hugo's back was to Melody, while Guy sat farther around to the side. Neither could see the doorway, where Melody stood, without turning in their chairs. Guy's arm was still in a sling. A belt and gun hung on a wooden peg driven into one of the adobe walls. Probably, Guy's weapon, or Luke's. Guy was unarmed at the moment, although Hugo wore his brace of ivory-butted forty-fives.

Guy again took up the conversation. "It looks like the best bet to me. We can wipe out the Rafter-S all at once—"

"That's just what I don't like about your idea," Hugo cut in. "Everybody knows that me and Norris has had trouble. If the Rafter-S got wiped out, suspicion would sure as hell point my way. And there's the gal, too—"

"Let suspicion point from here to Hades!" Guy snapped. "What do you care? Suspicion ain't proof." He moved his unbandaged hand to the bottle and poured another drink. "You're gettin' awful skeery all of a sudden, Hugo. Doc Kenyon will be here tomorrow afternoon to see Luke. We'll manage to keep him here the rest of the day. That'll make an alibi for you'n me, see?"

Hugo shook his head dubiously. "It'll sure raise a heap of hell."

By now, Melody had shifted the roll of skinned-out brand under one arm, and moved into the doorway. Neither of the Du Sang's heard him, as he stood leaning nonchalantly against the door jamb. The cowboy hadn't drawn his guns, but his hands hovered close to holsters.

Guy was laughing nastily now. "Who do you figure will raise any hell, Hugo? With Higley gone, there ain't no law officer to take the matter up. By the time they'd get one down here, things will have blown over. Our men can drift back here one at a time, when everything has quieted down. It might be a good idea to bury all of the bodies, before anybody gets wind of what's happened. It'll just be a mysterious disappearance. I can't see why the idea don't appeal to you, so long as nobody can't hang anythin' on us."

"But the gal—" Hugo commenced.

"Hang the girl!" Guy exclaimed impatiently. "If you're afeared to rub her out—why, we'll get rid of her some other way. Now, make up your mind. The boys will be back pretty soon. Are you goin' to send 'em to the Rafter-S, or are you goin' to lay down and lose your nerve? Either the Rafter-S goes down, or we do! Which is it to be?"

Hugo threw both hands into the air with a gesture of consent. "All right," he said hopelessly, "you win. Tell the boys I said to go ahead, when they come back. We simply gotta have the Rafter-S—"

"Try and get it!" Melody spoke suddenly. He had been unable to contain himself any longer. "Not a move, Du Sang!" he added swiftly. "I'll be pluggin' you, first chance!"

HUGO DU SANG abruptly went rigid in his chair, back still turned to Melody. Guy Du Sang had started to rise, but now sank back with a curse. Still, Melody had made no move to draw his guns.

Hugo recognized the cowboy's voice. "You damn' red-head!" he spat venomously. "What you doin' here?"

"Take a chance, Hugo, take a chance," Guy urged. "He ain't got his guns out—"

"Neither have you, feller," Melody laughed softly. "I can fill my hand and roll lead a heap faster than either of you, so just take it easy."

Guy glanced longingly at the gun hanging on the wall, but didn't dare to try to reach it. "Well, what's the game?" he snarled.

The loud voices had aroused the sleeping Luke. He opened his eyes, recognized Melody, cursed weakly, but seemed unable to do more.

"Now that you fellers are calmed down," Melody continued after a moment, "I'll give you the reasons for my visit. In the first place, I wa'n't fooled a bit by the news that your crew had quit. I knew they was some plan afoot, so I thought I'd drift over and see could I learn what it was. I did—and it's a pretty lousy game!"

He paused a moment, then tossed the skinned-out portion of hide over Hugo's head, to land on the table. "Give a look at that, you thievin' coyotes," he went on. "Several others have seen it, beside myself, so it don't matter much, if I don't get it back. We could pro'bly get some more of the same evidence, if it was needed."

There was nothing else to do. Hugo Du Sang unrolled the piece of green hide, then suddenly burst into a fit of cursing in which he was joined by Guy. Both knew that denial was useless.

Hugo tried to bluff it out. "Well, what about it?" he growled.

"Just this." Melody's tones were sharp. "I've been checking over the Rafter-S tally book, Du Sang, and I figure if it hadn't been for you rustlin' hombres, Norris could have paid off his mortgage by this time."

"What about it?" Hugo repeated.

"Du Sang," Melody explained, "I ain't forgot that you acted sorta square that day I come over here and killed Manitoba. I'm tryin' to square that account, and give you a chance to get out with a whole hide. We got plenty evidence against you, if we take this matter to court. But courts take pretty long to get goin' sometimes. You're holdin' that Rafter-S mortgage paper. I want it, in exchange for that brand-blottin' evidence. After that, you fellers can leave the country and nothin' more will be said."

"You can go to hell, that's what you can do," Guy sneered.

"Don't let him get away with that," Luke croaked from his cot.

Hugo was more calm. "You want that mortgage for this piece of hide, eh? Madigan, that ain't accordin' to law. If you think you got anythin' on us, you better take the matter to court." He was stalling for time, hoping for the arrival of the Diamond-8 punchers.

Hugo shifted slightly in his chair as he spoke the words. "None of that, Du Sang!" Melody ordered swiftly. "I want your back to me. Don't try to turn around." Again, Hugo settled in his chair.

MELODY continued the conversation, "I've just told you that I'd just as soon this matter didn't get into the courts. Hell! I don't want that mortgage tied up in no law courts. It might take a long time to get things unraveled. I got another reason for takin' this action. We could come over and put on a big fight, and probably clean you out, but I don't see no reason for sheddin' blood if it can be avoided. Gimme that mortgage. That's all I'm askin', but you've got to make up your mind pronto!"

"I ain't got that paper," Hugo lied.

"I don't bluff easy," Melody snapped tartly. "Du Sang, you're just the sort of hombre that would keep a paper of that sort close to you. Now, c'mon, lemme have it."

Du Sang stirred uneasily "S'posin' I don't see it your way?"

"You will," Melody laughed coolly, "or I'm li'ble to get impatient and start rollin' my lead."

Du Sang didn't reply at once. He had sensed something grim in that laugh. Melody could feel the eyes of the wounded Luke on him. He hoped that Luke didn't have a gun concealed beneath his blankets. Guy was cursing in a savage undertone, his eyes a poisonous glare of hate.

"All right," Hugo finally consented. "I'll get it." He started to rise from his chair.

"Sit right where you are, Du Sang!" Melody barked. Du Sang sank back. "I ain't trustin' you, Du Sang," the cowboy continued. "Tell your brother to get it for me."

A look of disappointment, which Melody couldn't see, passed across Hugo's features. Hugo looked at his brother, then

nodded to Guy. "Go get it," he said. Guy got to his feet.

"I'm hopin'," Melody drawled, "that the paper is in this room. "Otherwise, Du Sang, I'll have to have your brother tie you up, while I go along with him to get that mortgage—and if they's any tyin' up to be done, I'll give the knots a plumb thorough examination before I leave you alone. I don't trust you hombres—none a-tall!"

Guy's face clouded up like a thunderstorm. He stood at the table, uncertain how to proceed. Hugo couldn't quite suppress the chuckle of admiration that passed his lips. "You got a good head on you, Madigan," he conceded grudgingly. "All right, you win. That mortgage is in a drawer in this table. I can reach it, myself."

"Just make sure you don't pull no hawg-laigs outta that drawer," Melody warned coldly. "And don't make no fast moves, or I'm li'ble to think you're tryin' somethin'."

Mentally, Hugo cursed the awkward position in which Melody had found him. Due to the arms on the chair in which he was seated, it was impossible for Hugo to make a quick draw without rising. Even then, he'd have to turn to face Melody.

Guy was still standing by the table. Hugo bent forward slowly, pulled open the drawer beneath the table's leaf, and after a moment drew our several papers. He sorted them over, finally selected one in a long envelope, and passed it to Guy. "Hand that to Madigan," he ordered. A look of understanding passed between the two men in that instant. Hugo was staking everything he had on one play.

Melody watched the two warily as Guy crossed the room, the envelope in one outstretched hand. The very ease with which Du Sang had surrendered the paper, made Melody suspicious. He felt there was something in the air. but couldn't decide just what it was. Hugo sat as before; Guy was unarmed; Luke was stretched, helpless, in bed.

Melody accepted the envelope from Guy's hand, then, "Back where you were, feller," he ordered. "I don't want to shoot at an unarmed man, but at the same time I ain't trustin'you. I'll draw if you force me to." He glanced quickly at the envelope in his hand, then spoke to Hugo, as Guy retreated to the table. "How am I to know this is the mortgage paper?" he asked.

And that was exactly what Hugo had been waiting for. "You'll have to take my word for it," he replied carelessly, "or else look at the paper. That envelope ain't sealed."

Chapter XXI

THE FIGHT AT THE DIAMOND-8

MELODY didn't miss the challenge in the words. "Oh, yeah," he answered, "I might do that. I don't know much about readin' mortgages, though."

He was watching Du Sang closely now. The cowboy could see that Hugo was alert for the first rustle of paper. Melody laughed softly, and drew one thumb-nail across the envelope. It sounded exactly as though the paper were being drawn out.

There was no time for Guy to warn his brother of the trick. Like a flash Hugo left his chair and whirled, hands reaching to holsters. A savage curse parted his lips, as he found himself looking directly into Melody's guns!

At the first movement, Melody had dropped the envelope and drawn his own forty-fives. It was all one smooth, eye-defying operation—the drawing of guns, the swift lift of barrels, the thumbing of savage explosions!

Du Sang's six-shooters flamed at almost the same instant, but both shots missed. Melody had leaped sideways, even as he unleashed his lead. He fired again, as Hugo swung his heavy guns in swift arcs that covered the moving cowboy. Hugo's big body was lifted and thrown as though struck by some tremendous invisible force, but his aim wasn't completely spoiled.

Something struck Melody's shoulder a terrific impact, whirled him half off balance, sent him staggering back against the edge of the doorway. At the same instant, a leaden slug ripped into his leg, and finished the upsetting process! The cowboy suddenly found himself sprawled on the floor! Luckily, he had retained the hold on his guns.

But Hugo Du Sang was done for. Through a swirl of gray, Melody saw the big man go crashing across the room to fall on the floor beside Luke's cot. Melody's eyes shifted to Luke, now sitting upright, struggling to reach one of

Hugo's guns. Melody raised one gun to stop the move, then suddenly thought of Guy.

The cowboy twisted around, just as Guy overturned the table. It fell with a crash and shattering of glass as the lamp went to the floor and was instantly extinguished. Melody fired by instinct, heard Guy's yelp of pain, then stumbling footsteps. Guy was trying to reach that gun hanging on the wall.

The room was in Stygian darkness, now. Gritting his teeth against the pain, Melody crawled to another position. At the same moment a vicious stab of crimson ripped the gloom. A second later, there came a second shot from the vicinity of the cot. Both Guy and Luke were armed, now.

Again Melody shifted position. Neither of the shots had struck him, but they had come dangerously close. He propped himself in a sitting position, back braced against the wall near the doorway. There was an instant's silence. Melody felt himself growing weak. He decided to finish things before the Diamond-8 men arrived.

Laughing grimly, the cowboy thumbed one swift shot at the point where he guessed Guy to be standing. Again, he was rewarded by a sharp yelp of pain. Then hell broke loose! The room was illuminated by the brilliant flashes of light from the Du Sang guns! The house rocked with the concussions of the heavy weapons. Leaden messengers of death buzzed like angry hornets, and thudded into the wall at the cowboy's back, as the hammers slipped rapidly under his thumbs!

He heard a body strike the floor, knew that Guy Du Sang was finished. At the same instant another slug ripped into Melody's body. He was feeling deathly sick, now. It was all a crimson blur of smoke and roaring guns. The world reeled madly. Burnt powder stung eyes and throat and nostrils. Still, the cowboy fought grimly on. He realized quite suddenly that his hammers had been falling on empty shells for some time. He ceased working them. The room had gone strangely quiet.

"C'mon, you snakes," he called defiance, "let's finish it!"

His voice was a harsh croak, now, and he was too far gone to realize there had been no answering shot to his challenge. Somehow, he managed to extract the empty shells from his cylinders. "Stallin', that's what they're doin'," he mumbled thickly. "I'll show 'em what six-guns is really for."

For a few brief moments his fingers fumbled at cartridges in his belts, then everything went black and he toppled to one side.

DAWN was creeping in at the windows before Melody regained consciousness. He was stretched on the cot but lately occupied by Luke Du Sang. Things came back to him slowly, before he noticed an anxious group of worried faces bent above him. Gradually, he picked out the features of the Rafter-S crew. Events commenced to shape themselves more clearly, after that.

"Woke up, eh?" It was Jugandel's voice.

Melody nodded weakly and tried to rise. A hundred twinges of pain sent him to a reclining position, again. "Am I hit bad?" he muttered.

"Not bad, but often." It was Tom Norris speaking, now. "You'll be fit as a fiddle in a few weeks, son. But of all the damn' fool plays to make. We found that mortgage on the floor—"

"Keep it. That's what I come for." Melody smiled feebly. "Did I get Du Sang?"

"Get him?" Mesquite Farrell snorted. "Cowboy, you got three Du Sangs! Hugo lived long enough after we got here to confess everythin' he'd planned and the things he'd already done—stealin' stock from the other spreads, and so on. Guy and Luke is still livin', and may pull through to face a long jail sentence."

"But—but I don't understand," Melody frowned. "How'd you fellers happen to come here?"

"Jug-Handle woke up and heard you ridin' away," Norris explained. "He figured that was sorta funny so he got up and discovered that skinned-out piece of hide was missin'. Right away he guessed you'd come here. He got the rest of us up and into saddles before we knew what it was all about—even me what ain't hairpinned a bronc in months."

Jugandel took up the story. "We was nearly here when we heard the shots. Then the light went out and there was a heap more shootin'. It had all died down, though, before we come in the house. We could hear you mumblin' somethin' about

finishin' the fight, so we busted right in. Lord! When we found a lamp and lit it, this room looked like a tornado had swept through. While Norris was tendin' to you, I was questionin' Hugo Du Sang before he died. It was Manitoba that murdered our other Association detective. Du Sang confessed everythin'—"

"About intendin' to send his crew over to ambush us?" Melody queried.

"Yeah, that, too," Jugandel nodded. "So we was waitin' for them Diamond-8 snakes when they rode in from town. We'd already found the Chino cook, scared to death, almost, in the cook shanty. Anyway, we laid low when them Diamond-8 punchers arrived. They was all drunker than hoot-owls, and headed direct for the bunkhouse. Then we dropped down and made 'em prisoners. Easiest thing you ever saw. Now, that we got 'em all tied up, they're plumb eager to turn state's evidence to save their own skins. They'll tell everythin' they know. Cowboy, this neck of the range is cleaned up proper, and there's a heap of thanks owin' to you—"

YOU ain't so bad yourself," Melody grunted. "In fact, all you fellers has done as much as me—"A cry of protest went up which he interrupted with, "Was Jerry all right when you left?"

"Hell, son," Norris replied, "do you think Jerry would be left behind at a time like this? She come, too, totin' her gun an' ready for trouble. She's upstairs, now, lookin' for some cloths to use for bandages. Who do you think fixed you up like this?"

For the first time Melody noticed the bandages on his body.

"Matt Oliver has gone to Vaca Wells for Doc Kenyon," Norris continued. He checked himself suddenly and looked somewhat concerned. "That reminds me. Jerry said you wa'n't to be bothered or talked to, if you woke up. She'll give us hell for goin' against her orders."

Melody's ears caught a light, quick footstep, then, "Melody!" a voice cried.

Somehow, the men faded out of the room, after that. Melody saw Jerry's face nearing his own, felt warm arms encircling him. Maybe he passed out from sheer happiness. Perhaps, unbelievable as it may seem under the circumstances, he just went to sleep. Anyway, the sun was shining into the room when he again opened his eyes. Jerry was seated next to his cot. The cowboy was feeling stronger already.

The girl caught the sound of his voice and turned. There were the usual preliminaries to be indulged in, before he spoke again. Then, "It's sure goin' to be great," he told her.

"What is?"

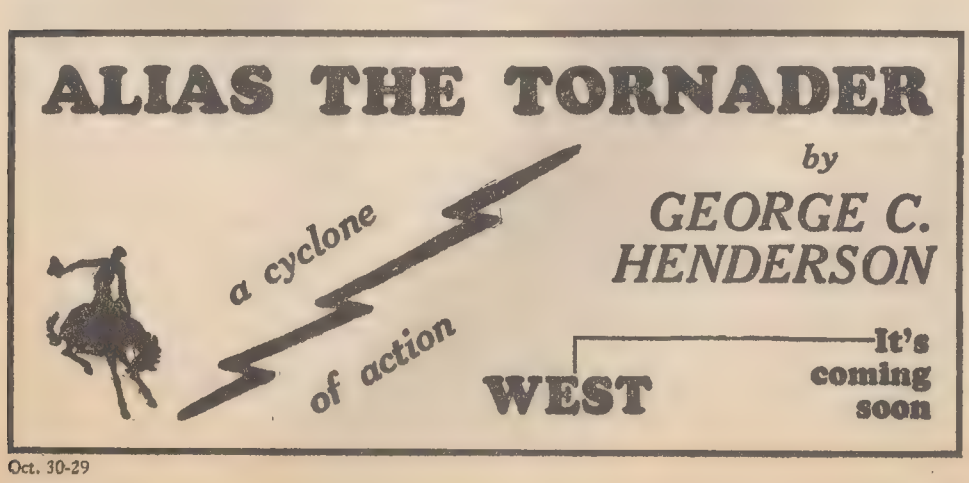
"Havin' you around always, and things peaceful and all, like they're bound to be. I'll have to get out my accordion, and play you a song I been makin' up lately."

"What's it about, cowboy?"

Melody's eyes widened. "My gosh, girl, don't you know? . . . Why, it's 'bout you'n me, of course! Nothin' else matters, does it?"

And from the manner of her answer, it may be judged that nothing else did matter, at least to Jerry and Melody.

THE END



ASK ME AN OLD ONE!

Dear Soogan:

Would you please tell us how wild horses are usually caught? We have read that there are lots of wild horses still running in parts of the West and would sort of like to try our hand at catching them.

Ted Long,
San Francisco, Calif.

CATCHING wild horses is no business for a novice. It is the most difficult, most dangerous, and most exciting sort of range work. It requires far more skill to round up and corral wild horses than to do any other thing that cowboys are ever called upon to do. In most cases wild horse catchers are professionals who do nothing else. Coming from the ranks of cowpunchers they are the hardest riding and most daring of their kind and few of them ever live to a healthy old age. Yet there is a wild thrill about it, the excitement of racing wildly over rough country and of pitting one's brain against the cleverest of wild animals, that once a man has known it he seldom if ever gives it up. In this issue of WEST is a story by Glenn A. Connor called "Runnin' Wild" that dramatizes this feeling better than I can possibly explain it.

There are various ways of catching wild horses. Their use depends on the nature of the country, the character of the horses to be caught and the preference of the man who is running the roundup. In the early days the Indians and many of the white settlers used to *walk down* wild horses. At first thought it is hard to believe that a man can walk down a wild horse, but it is true. The reason for it is that it takes a horse so much longer to feed than it takes a man to eat a meal and that a horse's hoofs soon get tender when forced over rough country. Thus, after a couple of weeks of dogged tracking down the persistent walker has the wild horse thin and weak and tender footed and thus he can be easily corraled. However, I wouldn't advise anybody to try this method unless he was a walker sure enough.

Another method used by the early settlers was to crease the horse with a rifle bullet. They would attempt to shoot the animal in the hard cartilage that runs along the back of the neck. If the shot were successful the animal would be stunned long enough to get a rope on him, but if the shot were unsuccessful there was as likely as not to be a dead horse. This is another method that should be tried only by experts.

The usual method and by far the most exciting method is for a few fellows to go out, each with a string of tough, fast saddle horses, and attempt to run the wild bunch into a corral or some sort of a concealed trap. Thus a wild horse man will locate the range of the particular bunch of wild horses he wants to catch. Then he will build a very high walled corral or trap in some canyon that the wild bunch has been in the habit of using. That hard work finished the real excitement of the chase begins. The various men take up positions in the hills so that they may head the wild bunch into the canyon. Then somebody starts the wild bunch moving. Tails and heads up the wild horses thunder across the range. The wild riding punchers follow, spurring their horses in an attempt to turn the bunch toward the next man. As soon as the herd gets in position this man takes up the chase and heads them to the next rider and so on until the herd is safely in the corral.

Sounds easy, doesn't it? Well just try it. Over and over again the wild bunch will be forced to the very entrance of the canyon to only break away again by superior speed or cunning. It is nerve breaking, disposition-trying work. But it is one of the greatest thrills a man can get.

Soogan Sam.

THIRTEEN NOTCHES

IF THERE is anyone who doesn't think the story *Thirteen Notches* by Foster-Harris isn't straight goods, just lamp the following letter.

Foster-Harris says:

"I don't know but what this little, short yarn has a couple of spots not completely exposed on its necktie.

"First, the oil town John Law killer. Are there honestly such critters? There are and you could find some right now if you cared to. I've been and looked at—well, several boom town John Laws here and there and some of them were fine folks and some the closest resemblance to the oldtime two-gun bad badman I've ever met.

"Second, this underhand, shoulder holster draw. This particular draw I'm describing from the way I saw an old gent out in the Panhandle do it—no, he wasn't killing anybody. Its idea is to move the gun from holster to firing position by the simplest and most direct route.

"These spring clip holsters, as I suppose you know, have a spring that fits around the cylinder so all you have to do is just jerk the gun loose instead of having to lift it out as with a pouch style. The gun hangs with the barrel straight up and down under your arm, butt to the front.

"Now to pull and fire your artillery the usual way, you've either got to jerk the gun out and to the right across your chest, twisting to the right and shooting across yourself, which is a bum way to be accurate—or you've got to swing the muzzle around and sort of turn the gun right side up. What I'm driving at is that the muzzle has to go through a sort of corkscrew curve. And that's a hard way to hit anything in a hurry, waving your gun all around in curves just beforehand.

"But if you simply flick the gun out and swing the muzzle straight out and up, kind of like you were tossing a brick underhanded at whatever you're shooting at, then you'll find that you don't need to wobble the muzzle all over the landscape. Your hand will be thumb down (that is, gun upside down) or at least with the back of your hand up when your barrel swings to the horizontal and you shoot.

"The point is, you move the muzzle in the shortest, simplest way from straight down to horizontal and you swing the gun in a vertical plane. This last feature is the important one because a man target is generally a whole lot longer (up and down) than he is broad. Shooting at the middle of him it's a heck of a lot better to hit a little high or low than it is a little too far to right or left.

"Kind of hard to describe this clearly but try it with your hand, pretending you're pulling a gun from under your arm and you'll get what I mean. There's really a lot of science to the seemingly simple act of taking a gun out of a holster and shootin' the thing in a plumb hurry. That is, there is if you hit what you're shooting at.

"As to a real, high power gunman looking slow—well, that's not imagination. Happened to be living in Ardmore when Sheriff Buck Garrett and his famous deputy, Bud Ballew, were the law down there and knew 'em both. Ballew was sort of fat and generally looked very mild and easy going. Never could imagine him doing any lightning fast gun pulling, and it seems a whole lot of hard, fast guys were under the same false impression. Anyway at different times

they'd start in to shoot him fulla holes before he could recollect where he was wearing his gun that morning—and Bud would just sorta remove his artillery from his pants and prepare said hard guy for burial. He laid away a lot of 'em before he mixed up with some Texas folks who laid him away.

"I remember there used to be a certain cafe on the main drag in Ardmore that used to have its plate glass windows decorated with bullet holes regularly—and then there was a ball up on a flagpole, on top of a building at one of the main corners—said ball resembled a tea strainer more'n anything else. Them were the days.

"The stunt of taking a gun away from a man—yeah, it can be done. They teach New York cops how, I believe. Anyway I met an ex-N. Y. flatfoot down here once who could turn the trick—and, incidentally, he was about the fastest guy with his hands I ever saw. That's a weakness of the underhand draw—if somebody grabs the barrel you're plumb liable to get shot yourself.

"Sort of a long letter for such a short yarn. Hope it hasn't bored you. Hand guns are a sort of hobby of mine."

Yours,

Foster-Harris

PIZEN OAK SEZ

THE rodeea season bein' 'bout all done I'm here to tell yuh broncs is gittin' twistier an' punchers is gittin' ridin'er every year. I ain't one o' them which holds as thar ain't ben no real punchers sence the year 1870.

THE CHUCK WAGON

(Driv by Old Pizen Oak)

I AIN'T a-gointa spile much time this mornin'. I says to the editor, after givin' out a issue like this here one with a serial by *Ernest Haycox,* a novel by *Clem Yore* an' a short by *Foster-Harris* all to oncet we'd oughta skip a issue an' go hunt deer. But the old bird gits all het up an' durn nigh sends me down the rudd. Addin' to that come a big frost last night. My bones is so stiff I can't hardly crawl outa the bunk, an' when I starts the fire an' drops a chunk o' wood on, the grate is so cold it bust plumb in two.

Wal, the editor ain't satisfied givin' yuh three o' the best writers what ever scratched paper all in one issue, but he's a-gointa stick into the next issue a novel by *H. Bedford-Jones,* the daddy of 'em all. When H. B. lets fly a story, she's always in the bull's eye. It'll be yore own fault if yuh miss this wallopin' long fast and furious novel which is named *Quick-Trigger.*

I wants to interdooce to WEST readers *Palmer Hoyt,* which wrote *The Fargo Kid.* Mr. Hoyt is a lumber jack an' leather-pushin' writer—an' he ain't no mean ink slinger neither. We plans to git as many stories by him in WEST as he kin turn out.

They's a novelette by *Richard A. Martinsen* name o' *Loaded with Dynamite,* an' Dick Martinsen shore loads his stories with what's needful to make 'em lope along like lightnin'.

An' our ol' *Baldy Sours* hits the laugh spots ag'in in *Baldy Sours and the Day of Judgment* by *Charles W. Tyler. Chaffee of Roaring Horse* by *Ernest Haycox* is on'y in part two, an' can be begun here most as good as if 'twas part one.

A Snaky Rope by *George Cory Franklin, Howling Death* by *Rufe Gable,* an' *Gunlightnin' Strikes Deepwater* is all cowboy yarns ridin' the WEST quality bronc to a standstill. An' *Vermilion Makes Medicine* by *R. E. Hamilton* is another Boston, Pill an' Vermilion story, an' is crammed full o' good large laughs.

All them in the November 13th issue an' on display October 30th.

Come an' lap it up or I'll feed it to the cattle!

THE WEST COMES TO BROADWAY

RODEOS start out West as early as June—usually after the calf round-up, they are going on somewhere or other nearly all Summer, and reach their height after the beef roundup. The dozens of small rodeos send their local favorites to the bigger stampedes at Pendleton, Cheyenne, Prescott, Miles City, and other cattle centers, and when the greatest cowboys and cowgirls of the year have proven themselves, they all throw their hats into the ring at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

There the season's worst buckers and best riders gather to compete for the world's championship, and incidentally to bring to many thousands of Easterners a breath of the open spaces, and a glimpse of what it takes to make a cowboy.

From time to time WEST has published data on the progress of the summer-long battle for supremacy in this rodeo game that is fast becoming one of America's most popular sports.

WEST editors, some of whom are themselves ex-cowboys, have envied WEST readers who could follow the rodeo game, and you can bet your shirt we'll be present to see the fast work in Madison Square. It's the real thing and no mistake.

The announcement says: "The Annual World Series Rodeo at Madison Square Garden is not a 'Wild West Show'—there are no 'Circus Stunts'—there are no 'Paid Performers'—every cowboy and cowgirl who takes part in this final championship rodeo is an actual contestant. They have traveled thousands of miles at their own expense to enter these contests—to compete with the winners of every outstanding Western rodeo held during the 1929 season—to share in the thousands of dollars offered in purses and prizes awarded annually at New York's World Series Rodeo.

"This contest is for *real hands*. Every contestant is required to supply his own saddle and equipment."

Calf roping, trick and fancy riding, for both men and women, bareback bronc riding, saddled bronc riding for men and women, steer riding, wild horse racing, fancy roping, steer wrestling—all these nerve- and skill-testing events to decide the championship in each will be featured nightly, from October 24th to November 2nd.

As an exciting novelty there will be polo contests between internationally known players and cowboys, and as an added thriller, if the audience can stand any more thrills, cowboys will ride wild buffalo, fresh from government preserves—a feat without parallel in rodeo history.

Yowee!! Is there anyone readin' this who doesn't wish he could be there?

PRIZE LETTER

WEST is giving a prize of twenty-five dollars every two weeks for the most interesting letter from a reader. Everyone has a chance—no date limits—a new prize every issue! the letter can be about anything in the West (either the country or the magazine). It can be facts, suggestions, criticism, or history—but it must be interesting. Don't fail to try your luck!

HERE'S a letter from "Up Under the High Country," where the West is still in the rough.

Editor, WEST.
Dear Sir:

A few desk lizzards who earn their bacon and beans writing wise cracks have been broadcasting that the picturesque West is fading, that the cowboy with his bronc, the prospector with his burro and the native wild game are disappearing faster than the vanishing American.

We, who staked claims in the gold rushes, and run cattle over these ranges know that there is still gold in the gulches, that cattle rustlers can still be found in the hills and that adventure is still here a plenty for those who crave it.

My outfit is about 8,000 feet up in the Nevada Hills and we are already putting in our winter supplies. My partner is a regular "Hill

The Laugh Corral

First Cowboy: *"Well, what do you think of our little city?"*
Second Cowboy: *"I'll tell you, brother; this is the first cemet'ry I ever saw with lights."*

Mrs. Patterson Miller, Russellville, Tenn., walks off with the money this time.

(West will pay $2.50 for each joke or short, funny verse or limerick, not exceeding six lines, suitable for use on this page. Owing to the number of contributions received, West cannot acknowledge receipt of nor return these unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.)

Billy," eighty-three years old, still mining for the lost channel that spilled $150,000 into Hobart Creek and made a couple of prospectors rich in the early days.

Some think this is a pretty lonesome life, but we get what thrill-hunters pay good money to experience. San Francisco millionaires follow a rocky trail in the summer to fish in the reservoir and in the late autumn to hunt deer and bear and they consider themselves lucky if they can bunk in our cabin.

From Lookout Point we can look over on Virginia City, Nevada's famous mining camp where the forty-niners made their stakes and where Mark Twain began the newspaper and mining career which made his "Roughing It" such a fascinating story.

Which reminds me that a few years ago, the mining partner of Mark Twain, featured in "Roughing It," died in Greenville, California; and no preacher being present at the time, I read the funeral service at the grave.

There is no sameness about Western days. Any time you may be called out to fight forest fires, chase panthers that are getting the herders' sheep, hunt stray cattle or horses, fix breaks in the water flumes, take time out to fish, hunt or prospect in addition to the regular work of watching the water gauges.

When the snow flies, and the thermometer drops down to ten below zero, and the wind comes sweeping over eight feet of snow, we get out WEST—even the back numbers are still good—and take solid comfort. These stories speak a language we understand and there's no "Bunk" about them. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely, *F. E. KRUGER.*

(If you have trouble in getting your regular copy of West, please speak to your newsdealer about the matter, or write directly to West Magazine, Garden City, New York.)

YOU will find in *THE AMERICAN HOME*, a new kind of home magazine published by Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., all manner of things for your home and garden . . . lessons in decoration . . . the magic of color . . . the care of house plants . . . things for the man who likes a work bench . . . rugs—how to buy and care for them . . . the fascinating fun of rock gardening . . . new bathroom fittings . . . growing vegetables in the cellar . . . how much house can I afford . . . what is new for the housewife's purse . . . these are just SOME of the things you'll find in this one issue . . . you can buy it on any newsstand for 10c!

The American Home

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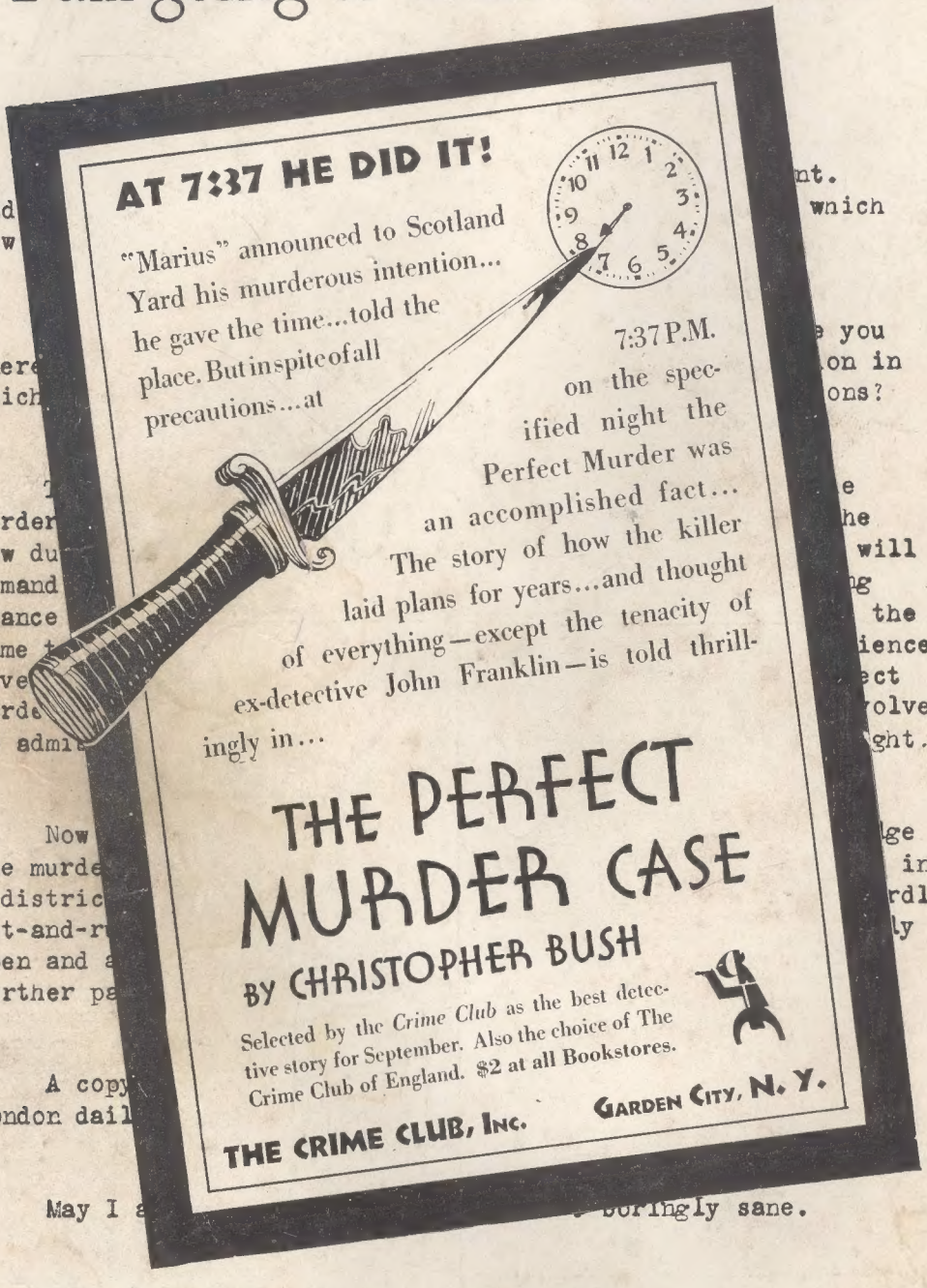
DRUG STORE

There is one near you. You will recognize it by this sign. Liggett's are also Rexall stores.

Dear Sir:

September 6th, 1929

I am going to commit a murder.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